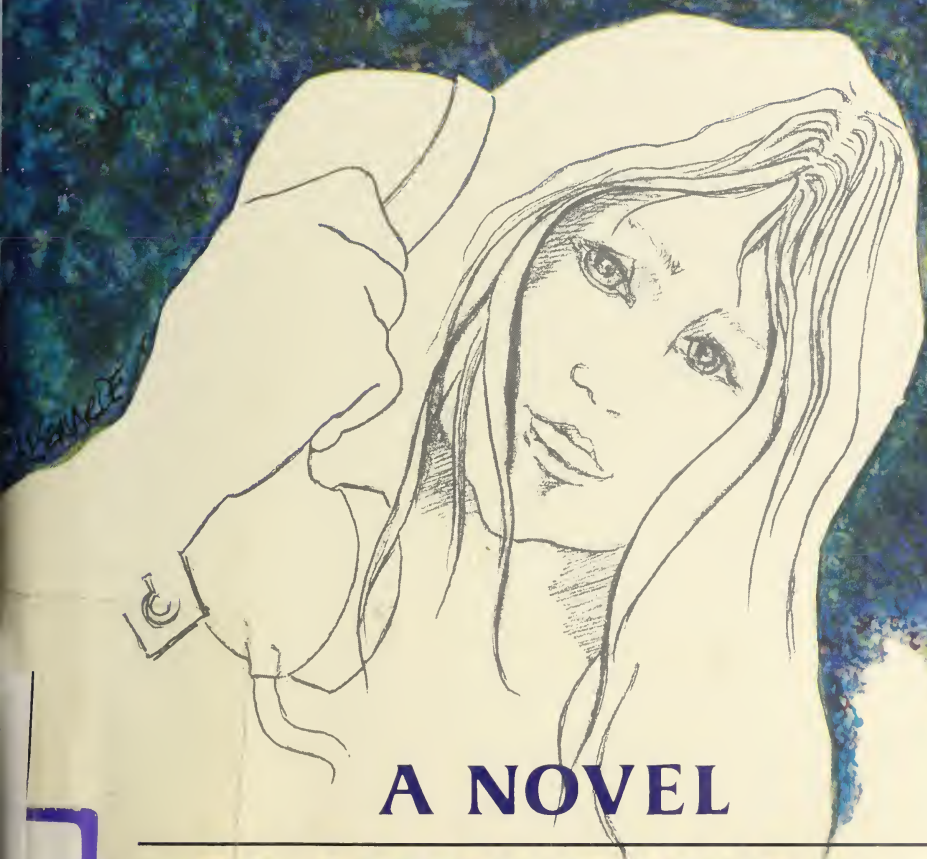
PROMISES ARE FOR KEEPING



A NOVEL

BY ANN RINALDI

PROMISES ARE FOR KEEPING

A NOVEL

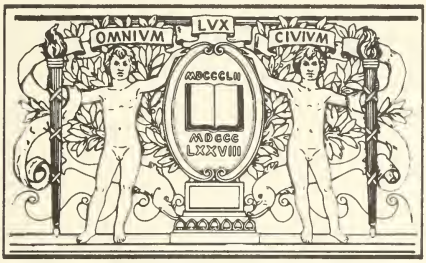
BY ANN RINALDI

When Nicole is caught stealing birth control pills from the office of her brother, Larry, her already-troubled relationships plummet. The pills are for Meredith, but how can she tell on her friend? And if she doesn't tell, they'll think they're for *her*! That's all it would take to wipe out her boyfriend's chances for a football scholarship. Eric would be off the team for good. Nicki's other brother, Tony, the team coach, would see to that.

Usually Tony was tough but fair; but his attitude toward Eric had complicated things for Nicki. Her brother, Larry, used to be so good to her, and they'd had such fun together. But now that he and Tony had become her legal guardians, he'd become a dictator, forcing her to become a candy-striper at the hospital and making it necessary for her to resign as yearbook photographer and miss the Saturday football games. He'd messed up everything. And now this. . .

In this striking sequel to the novel, *Term Paper,* Nicki grows in her understanding of the contradictions in human relationships, and learns the necessity of being responsible for her own actions. Ann Rinaldi brings a special sensitivity for the feelings of young adults to this provocative story.

WITHDRAWN
No longer the property of the
Boston Public Library.
Sale of this material benefits the Library.



BOSTON
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

PROMISES ARE FOR KEEPING

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2014

https://archive.org/details/promisesareforke00rina

PROMISES ARE FOR KEEPING

Ann Rinaldi

WALKER AND COMPANY
New York

Copyright © 1982 by Ann Rinaldi

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electric or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

All the characters and events portrayed in this story are fictitious.

First published in the United States of America in 1982 by the Walker Publishing Company, Inc.

Published simultaneously in Canada by John Wiley & Sons Canada, Limited, Rexdale, Ontario.

ISBN: 0-8027-6442-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-70391

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Robert Barto

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER

1

IT WAS AFTERNOON on Saturday of Labor Day weekend, four weeks before my fifteenth birthday, and four days before I was to start my second year of high school, when the call was made out of the town of Runnymede in New Jersey.

The caller told the operator that the governor was going to be assassinated that afternoon. Then the caller hung up.

The call was made out of my brother Larry's house—on his physician's phone. Larry is a well-known doctor in town. His office is on the other side of the house.

Donnie Torrensano made the call. Torrensano, for all intents and purposes, is a jerk. When he is not doing dumb stuff like this he is intercepting passes for my brother Tony, who is head coach at Runnymede High. And by the end of the year about eighty-five colleges will be after him, and he knows it. So he thinks he can get away with anything.

"You must have gotten hit in the head at practice this morning, you know that, Torrensano?" I yelled it at him.

We were sitting around Larry's living room when it happened. I was staying with Larry for the weekend, the way I do

several times a year. I live with Tony and his wife, Carol. But every so often I stay with Larry so they can have some time together and so Larry and I can keep up our relationship.

Our relationship has not been so wonderful lately, I can tell you that. And after Torrensano made his call I knew it was going to be a lot less wonderful. Relationships are tricky. I'm still working on most of mine.

We had a whole weekend planned, Larry and me. That evening he was taking me to a Jimmy Cagney movie at the college. Then we were picking up his girl at the train station. Molly goes to law school at Temple University and this was her last free weekend for a while. Sunday we were going to hang around, maybe cook on the gas grill in Larry's backyard next to his in-the-ground pool.

Then idiot Torrensano had to go and ruin it.

Idiot Torrensano was not supposed to be there in the first place. Larry had said that Meredith Mitchell could come because she's my best friend. But then she brought her cousin, Johnnie, who brought Torrensano.

Meredith and Johnnie and Torrensano had jumped the fence on Larry's property in back and come in the glass doors by the pool. They'd had sense enough to come in the back way at least. That way Ruderman couldn't see them.

Ruderman is Larry's head nurse. She is also a midwife, which means she can deliver babies for him if she has to. And she has ears and a nose that spot trouble better than a Doberman. She is tall and thin, and I don't even know what her first name is. All I know is that she runs his office for him even though he has two other nurses. She even runs into the kitchen and makes his *lunch*, for crying out loud. And he eats it.

I think she's sweet on him. Except that she's old. She's thirty-five—older than my brother Tony, even.

Earlier that day she'd come in to check on us because we were making so much noise. "You kids quiet down in here or I'm going to throw you out," she ordered. She would too.

We weren't doing anything much. It was too humid to swim, and we couldn't play Larry's stereo because nobody is allowed to touch it without permission, not even me. It's very expensive and all built into the wall, next to the bookshelves. The living room is huge, with a cathedral ceiling and bedrooms upstairs off a hall beyond the balcony.

Larry bought this big old English Tudor house last fall, set up his office on one side and his home on the other. Outside it's all English fieldstone with ivory-colored stucco on the upper half, criss-crossed with brown beams. It has those darling little leaded windows that open out. Inside there are hardwood floors with Oriental rugs and light-colored walls filled with artwork. Larry has combined modern furniture with antiques. There is a knack to decorating, and he has it.

We were watching a Cary Grant movie on TV. Nobody noticed Torrensano pick up the phone. Then he put it down. "Guess what I did?" he said, like he couldn't believe his own stupidity.

"You lunatic!" I screamed. "Jesus, Torrensano, Jesus!"

Tony would nail me if he heard me say it. And Larry has threatened to wash my mouth with soap, like Mom did with him when he was a kid. But I don't believe Mom ever did that. She wasn't the kind.

"She was," Larry had once told me. "Because when the old man left her for three years she had to raise Tony and me and she *had* to be tough."

But I still don't believe it. I think Larry's gotten stuffy in his old age. He's thirty-one now and established.

God, sometimes I can't stand how established he's getting. He looks at me over the top of his glasses like he doesn't remember the way it used to be with us back when Daddy was alive and he was away at medical school and he'd come home weekends We'd have snowball fights or he'd take me places, or we'd spend hours playing my computer games on the floor.

He hasn't picked me up and spun me around for months

now, for instance. He used to do that all the time. "Grow up, Nicole," he says. "You can't be a baby forever."

It isn't that I want to be a baby forever. It's just that *I* will decide when I'm grown up. And I have already decided that being spun around has nothing to do with it.

"Idiot Torrensano!" we all screamed at him now.

"You think they'll know where the call came from?" he asks, dumb-like.

"Of course! They'll trace it," Johnnie Mitchell said.

"To my brother's phone! Oh my God," I groaned. "My brother'll *kill* me. It's his doctor's line! *I* don't even use that line. He carries on like a maniac if I do."

We all looked at each other. I had tears in my eyes already.

"What'll we do?" Meredith asked. I thought she was going to wet her pants, she was so scared. She knows Larry doesn't like her. Larry first met her last spring when he came to school to pick me up after a freshman dance. The disco band was still playing in the gym even though the dance was over. And there was Meredith, going at it with all the right moves, like she was trying out to be a go-go dancer at DiLessio's across town.

Meredith is very built. And I saw Larry looking at her for a minute there like she was not his little sister's best friend. And then he caught himself. Larry acts very proper, but he's no monk, that's for sure.

"I would rather you didn't see that much of Meredith," he told me later. I've *told* him she isn't bad. Just a little crazy. She should be! She's one of eight girls and she can hardly walk across the street without her father's permission. And he yells at her in front of her friends, and hits her sometimes. Really bad. And I think that if it weren't for me Meredith would run away for sure. Or have a breakdown. Or, as they say in new car guarantees, whichever comes first.

By now, five minutes had gone by since Torrensano made his call and we figured we'd better get out. So we left. It was stultifying outside. We cut around the side of the house and jumped off the stone wall where the side driveway slopes into the

garage, then up the stone steps to the little terrace outside the sun porch. We were cutting across the circular drive when the white car with the blue and gold stripe on the side pulled up.

State Police. They stopped and got out. You know how they do in movies? Both at once. Slamming the doors. They looked at us. "Which one of you is DeBonis?" the taller one said.

CHAPTER

2

PEOPLE change.

Sometimes they change because they want to. They get up one morning and put on a whole new image. Sometimes you can see them wearing it like they are breaking it in.

I was sitting on the edge of Larry's bed, thinking how much he had changed lately. I had my hands under my legs on the ivory-sculptured bedspread. The door of his room was closed.

If you really have to know, the door was locked. From the outside.

I'd been in here going over in my mind how the police had dismissed Johnnie and Meredith right after Torrensano told them the rest of us had nothing to do with it. He did that much anyway. It may be the only good thing Idiot Torrensano ever did in his life.

And then, while one trooper hustled Torrensano into the car, the other one brought me into Larry's house.

There are two front doors to Larry's house, one for his office and one for his private residence. There is a sign on the lawn outside the stone fence that says, LAWRENCE DeBONIS, M.D. FAMILY PRACTICE.

Larry says a family practitioner can do most anything other doctors can do. He also says that God created the human body in one piece, and doctors have divided it up into twenty-two pieces. Sometimes he says that most of the illnesses people come to him with are caused by people themselves. And most of them would go away if people would let them.

He's got his act together most of the time, and it's a pretty good one, I have to say. A little while ago, when the trooper stood in his waiting room telling him what had happened, he kept a straight face, for instance—even when the trooper told him to have his sister available as a witness in juvenile court.

"Come along." That's all he said when the trooper left. So I followed him through the receptionist's area, through a door and down the hall that leads to his kitchen. Then through the kitchen and living room and up the stairs.

"Larry." I was breathless keeping up with him. He walked in great strides, and took the steps two at a time. "Larry," I pleaded, following, but he didn't answer. "In here," he said, outside the door of his bedroom. He stood holding the door for me. I went in. I stood looking at him.

"Larry, please listen to me!"

"I have a patient waiting. Make yourself comfortable." And he wouldn't look me in the eye because if he did he might be my old Larry again who would have rolled on the floor, laughing about the whole thing.

He just left, and I sat on the bed looking at the door for a while, sensing something. Then I got up and tried it.

It was locked. I couldn't *believe* it. Tears came into my eyes. I was outraged and hurt at the same time. It was a dumb thing to do, a parent-child kind of thing. Larry and I don't have that kind of relationship. We're friends!

I bounced on the bed angrily. Then I lay on my stomach, listening to the silence. There was a lamp on his night table, and I turned it on. Lamplight comforts me, especially when I'm scared.

I lay looking at the photos under the lamp. One was of Mom,

one of Tony and Larry and me. Tony was about nineteen, Larry about sixteen, and I was about a year. The other picture was of Molly. There was something really touching about the way Larry had them there next to his bed, the first thing he saw when the phone rang in the middle of the night.

He still goes out in the middle of the night, too. I'd been there a few times and heard the phone ring. He'd come down the hall, still pulling clothes on, his medical bag in hand.

"Go back to sleep," and he'd pause for a quick kiss.

"I don't wanna stay alone!"

"Yeah, well I'm gonna get a dog. One of these days, we'll go together and get one."

Middle-of-the-night calls are usually babies. I'd sleep restlessly, with the radio on and when he'd get home he'd come in and turn it off. And if it was a baby call I'd rouse myself to ask him what it was. And then I'd go to sleep, feeling something mystical about it all, very happy.

I love him so darned much is what the trouble is. He's so handsome and human and bright. And he's my brother. He can be in love with six girls at once, and nothing can change that.

It was almost an hour now before he came back. I lay there, hearing footsteps, watching the doorknob turn. He came in.

"Did you nap?" He stood looking down at me.

I searched his face to see what he was up to, but he has this little trick, like all doctors, of having no expression when it suits him. He looked at me through his glasses, hands in his chino pockets. His shirt was light blue, with yellow and dark blue stripes. It was short-sleeved, and his arms were tanned. So was his chest where the shirt was open and where you could see some dark, curly hair and the fine gold chain Molly had given him.

A few strands of grey shone in his dark brown hair. He wears sideburns and a moustache, and his physique is just as good now as when he was on the swim team in college. He is as tall as Tony, which is over six feet, but he is more wiry. And Tony is blond with blue eyes. Larry's eyes are brown like mine.

"Was I supposed to nap?"

"You were supposed to think. And now you are supposed to sit up when I'm talking to you and get your dirty feet off my bedspread."

I got up. "You didn't have to lock the stupid door," I said. "You *know* we don't have that kind of a relationship."

He knew what I meant, okay. I looked down at my browned thighs, at the ragged edges of my cut-offs, and thought about all the times when he used to come home from medical school in the middle of the night. I'd creep down the hall to his room and he'd carry me back to bed, no words necessary except "why aren't you sleeping," and "yes, you can wake me in the morning."

"The State Police were put on *alert*," he said, "from Morristown to Trenton! You know what that means in overtime alone?"

I said nothing. My stomach was starting to churn.

He adjusted his glasses. "My phone was tapped, too." He leaned over me. "I am a doctor," he enunciated clearly, "and my phone's been tapped."

I looked up at him appealingly.

"Will you just tell me why you invited that kid here? Without permission? You *know* you're not supposed to invite boys in without explicit permission. You know that!"

"We didn't do anything, Larry."

"I'm not saying you did anything. I'm not fond of Meredith anyway. You *know* that. It just looks like hell. You can bet on how it looks."

"You never used to worry about how things looked."

That stopped him. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're not like you used to be. There was a time when you would have laughed at something like this."

"No, no, wait." He pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. "I was young then and not responsible for you, Nicki. You don't get it all—the difference between then and now."

"It doesn't have to be different, Larry."

"Now, damn it, stop that! Don't use that on me. It's not fair!" He yelled it at me. I can't stand it when he yells at me. I started to cry.

"Oh, jeez." He turned away and went over to the window and looked out. "You gonna cut that out?" he said angrily.

I stopped.

He turned around, subdued by my tears. "Nicki," he said gently, "what happened here today was horrendous. When I was a kid you could pull stunts like today. But no more. You can see what happened because of a simple prank call. Police, alerts, tapped phones. You have to live defensively today. We've talked about this, so there's no excuse for it."

I said nothing. He went and sat down in his favorite wing chair.

"I don't want to live defensively," I said in a very small voice.

He did not answer. He sighed. He was leaning back in the chair now, eyes closed, and it was a while before he answered.

"Larry?"

"The Trotter boy died today," he said.

Something dropped inside me. "Oh, Larry, I'm sorry." I slipped off the bed and went to him. His eyes remained closed. I touched his arm. "Larry?"

He kept his eyes closed. "I've got a headache. Had one all day."

"You want me to get you some aspirin?"

"Yes. Would you please, Gypsy?"

It was the name that only he called me. Gypsy. When he'd come home to Runnymede to open his practice, and I started staying with him occasionally, he started calling me that. I didn't mind. It was a fine name by me.

His bathroom was off the bedroom and I got the aspirin. I pulled a paper cup from the dispenser and let the water run cold. Eddie Trotter! No wonder Larry was in such an awful mood!

Two nights ago Eddie, who was a freshman at the local community college, had been out walking with a friend. Some kids came by in a car and started taunting them. A scuffle had started. One of the taunters got a baseball bat from the trunk of his car and hit Eddie on the head with it.

Larry was working in Emergency when they brought Eddie in. He never regained consciousness. My God, I thought, he's going to take this hard.

I brought the water to him, with the aspirin.

"Thank you, Gypsy."

I stood watching him take the aspirin. The brown eyes were very sad. "We're going to talk," he said quietly.

"Oh, Larry."

"Don't make it difficult for me now. When Eddie Trotter died, I was one of the doctors in the room with the family. You know how close they were, and he was the baby." He took my hand in his own on the arm of the chair. "He was in the coma, but struggling. His older sister sensed it. 'Eddie, you can go now,' she told him. 'We'll let you go.' Then he died."

He fell silent, rubbing my hand with his own. "Everyone's talking about trouble in the Middle East. And all around us people are killing each other indiscriminately. Nobody realizes that the real war is down the block. Eddie Trotter got killed in action walking down a street in Runnymede."

I felt a chill run through me.

"I worry about you, Gypsy. You've been running wild all summer. I've told Tony that."

"I don't run wild. Tony doesn't let me."

"You do plenty he doesn't know about. How many times have I driven past the mall downtown and seen you hanging out with your friends?"

"I don't hang out. We're shopping."

"You mouth polite things to Tony and Carol," he went on, "and do as you please. Tony's busy coaching the basketball clinic and Carol's got all she can do counseling at the com-

munity center. You're not always so truthful either. How many times have you told Tony you're going out with your girlfriends, and you ended up with Eric?''

Eric. I was hoping he wouldn't get to Eric. I felt my cheeks burning, and I tried to pull my hand away, but he wouldn't let me. I shrugged. ''Tony knows we're friends, and we see each other.''

''Does Tony know you were in the park with him last Sunday? When I drove by, I saw his Mustang under the trees by the north entrance. When I stopped by the house, Carol said you were with Meredith. Tony would wear out your cut-offs more than they are in the seat if he knew you were lying to him.''

''I didn't lie. Meredith's throat was bad and her mother wouldn't let her go to the movies, and Eric came by and. . . .''

''Look,'' he interrupted, ''I didn't tell them. I know Eric's a good kid and he's Tony's star running back. I know how much Tony has put into him because his parents are divorced and he has no father.''

''And because Tony used to go with his mother,'' I said firmly.

He looked at me. ''That's right. When they were seniors in high school. What's that got to do with it? Don't tell me you've been listening to rumors, Nicki.''

I looked up, surprised. ''You know?'' I whispered.

The corners of his mouth went up in a sad smile. ''In a small town, there isn't much a doctor doesn't hear sooner or later, Nicki. Everybody's sins.''

I said nothing.

''I didn't think the rumor had reached you kids. That's unfortunate. But Tony's a popular figure in town. Under him, the basketball and football teams are unbeaten for how many years in a row now?'' He shook his head. ''His picture is always in the papers. You gotta figure somebody will be out to get him.''

''It stinks.''

''It stinks only if you two believe it.''

''I don't, Larry. But Eric. . . .''

"Why doesn't he approach Tony about it?"

Again I looked down. "He wouldn't do that. Neither would I."

"Well, you two will have to resolve it on your own. Trust isn't something that somebody can give you. I'm more concerned with you behaving yourself with Eric. And remembering the things I've told you about how to act with boys."

I colored. "I do, Larry."

"Still, you're running too wild. I've told Tony you should be candy-striping at the hospital. He says you're still a kid and you should have your summers free. Okay. When I tell him about today you'll be candy-striping next summer. Maybe before then."

My stomach flipped. I pulled my hand free. "You gonna tell him?"

"I have to. You may have to go to Juvenile Court."

Very soon now, I was going to have to throw up. Two, maybe three minutes at the outside, I decided. Four if I was lucky.

CHAPTER

3

I ALWAYS throw up when I'm upset. I did it the night my father died, when I was in the eighth grade. My father died right in front of me.

I was alone with him when he died. I caused my father's death, if you really want to know, because I argued with him when his heart was bad.

I don't tell everybody that. Of course, I didn't *know* how sick he was because my brothers didn't tell me. Tony and Larry both insist I was not at fault, that he was going to die anyway; the slightest thing could have set him off.

But it wasn't the slightest thing. It was me. The thing is, I have this knack for messing up relationships. I mess up every relationship I have, sooner or later.

I was starting to get that funny feeling inside me now. I started to move. Larry had been leaning his head back in the chair, eyes shut, and now they flew open. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go to the bathroom. I don't feel so good."

"No, Nicki. You won't get away with pulling that now."

"I'm not pulling anything. I have to throw up."

"Nicki, you cannot throw up every time you have to face up to a wrongdoing."

I ran. I just made it, too. Good thing for him, it would have been all over his floor in the bedroom. I was leaning over the john throwing my guts up when he came in.

"Damn." And he hit the doorjamb with his hand. "Damn if you aren't doing it again!"

I was so miserable I didn't care what he said. I leaned one hand against the tank of the john, a cold sweat coming out all over me. My heart was pounding and I was shaking too. "Go away," I managed.

He came in. He ran the water and soaked a washcloth and rung it out and held it on my forehead, then wiped my face. "Do you do this when Tony bawls you out, or is it my magic touch?"

"I don't do it, Larry. It just happens."

He flushed the john and put down the lid. "Sit."

I sat. He brushed my hair back and held the cold washcloth on my head for a few minutes, his other hand on the back of my neck. "Calm down," he said.

I did, with him holding me like that. Maybe all I wanted was his sympathy, I thought. Had I done it to get sympathy? Could I really do that?

He opened the medicine cabinet and took out some mouthwash. "You're going to be a real neurotic woman with little effort if you keep up this kind of stuff," he said, pouring the mouthwash into a paper cup. "You know that? Rinse."

I rinsed, and leaned over the sink to spit it out. "I'm neurotic already."

"The hell you are. And you won't be if I have any say in the matter. Look, we'll finish this discussion later. Why don't you shower? Then come down, and I'll make you some herb tea before supper."

"Okay. Can I use this bathroom?" I loved his bathroom. It

was roomy and bright, and all done in beige and blue and brown. He had huge, masculine designer towels, and the showerhead was one of those pulsating jobs.

"Go ahead, just tidy up when you're done." He stood in the doorway, real concern on his face, looking at me before he went out.

When I got downstairs he was making supper. Omelet. He was dicing ham and grating cheese. I sat at the counter in the middle of the kitchen. Above it hung baskets and copper-bottomed pots and wooden spoons.

He's a gourmet cook, and the kitchen is fully equipped. He has things like egg separators and whisks and cast-iron skillets and earthenware pitchers.

He set a cup of herb tea down in front of me, appraising me with an expert eye before turning away. "You should have dried your head."

"I'll do it later. What time is Molly coming?"

"The nine-twenty-nine."

"Can I go with you to pick her up?"

"Yes. You're to sleep with her in my room tonight, I meant to tell you."

It was a good thing his back was to me so he couldn't see the expression on my face. Sleep with Molly in his room? Did he think I was dumb or something? I *know* they sleep together.

"Larry."

He turned to look at me. "Yes?"

I wanted to tell him it was okay with me if they slept together. But jeez, how could I say that to him? "Could I have some sugar, please?"

"You're supposed to drink herb tea without sugar." But he set it on the counter anyway.

I sipped my tea. It was a yellowish green in color. I'm not crazy about herb tea, but I drank it to please him.

He's been a bachelor all his life, going from one girl to another. He almost married once, the winter before my father

died. But my father interfered. He thought the girl was not right for Larry.

As the middle child, Larry had a fierce battle to become his own person with my father. Tony was his own person ever since my father took off and left for Europe when Tony was in high school. Tony became the man of the family then. And when my father came back, Tony was a sports jock with a scholarship to college. So, since my father couldn't dominate Tony, he dominated Larry. And it continued right through Larry's college and medical school and almost through his residency—until they had the blow-up over the girl Larry was to marry.

I was born a year after my father came home from Europe. That's when Mom died. Tony was named my guardian when my father died. I was thirteen then. It was only right, since Tony and Carol had brought me up since I was eight anyway, ever since Tony had come back from Vietnam. But then last year, right after Christmas, Tony went to his lawyer and had Larry named one of my guardians too.

"To give me a break from you," he'd told me. But I think the real reason was to give Larry some more responsibility because he was so zonked out, breaking up with that girl.

I think that's when it all started, this change in Larry, when Tony had him named a guardian.

He came over to the counter now, set down a skillet and a bowl of stewed tomatoes and the plate of garlic bread. He spooned some omelet onto my plate and put some stewed tomatoes into a bowl for me. Then he sat down and helped himself. "I'd like you to go to Winslow with me on Monday," he said.

"Aw, jeez, Larry, why?"

"It'll do you good. Teach you some things."

"Because of what I did today?"

He poured himself some coffee. "Maybe," he said. Then he settled down to eat.

My heart sank. Winslow. A state training school for boys. Since the beginning of summer, he's been going there once a

week. He's become a "parallel parent," which means he volunteers his time to help this little Hispanic kid, Jeremy. Jeremy is twelve and in for stealing a car.

All the kids there are in for heavy stuff. Everything but murder.

When Larry is not taking Jeremy out, he is teaching him reading and math. Carol, the psychology major, says Larry is doing this because he feels obligated to make a difference in the world.

He also teaches "Human Sexuality" in the Catholic schools in the area. That's a fancy name for sex education. He ought to be good at it. He's been lecturing me about it since I was ten. He wrote all the courses himself. The nuns all love him. Sure they love him. He teaches against teenage sex and abortions in general. He doesn't believe in abortion. In Runnymede Memorial, he is one of the doctors who will not do them.

I made a face at him now. The way I feel about it, he can make all the difference he wants in the world as long as he doesn't drag *me* into it. "I'm supposed to go home tomorrow night so I can help Carol get ready for the picnic Monday," I said.

"Also," he continued, "the new bookcase I ordered for my office came in. Monday morning, I'd like you to arrange my reference books in it for me."

"Larry!"

"I heard what you said. I'll clear it with Tony." He stirred his coffee. "What have you got against coming to meet Jeremy, anyway?"

"Nothing. But if I'd known you wanted a juvenile delinquent to worry about, I'd have gone out and stolen a car." I felt bad the minute I said it.

He looked up from his plate. "You jealous?"

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference, if that's the reason you've been such a heller lately. I thought I was giving you enough attention."

"What do you think I am, a little kid, that I need attention?"

"We all need attention. That last remark of yours proves it. As soon as your bedroom upstairs is finished, I'm asking Tony to let you come and stay here one weekend out of the month. With Carol expecting, they should have a little more time together anyway. What do you say? Want to come and stay with me one weekend a month?"

I shrugged. "I s'pose."

"Well, don't bubble over with joy. I wouldn't want you to give the wrong impression. Look, kid, we haven't been getting on too well lately, you've noticed maybe?"

"I've noticed."

"Well, I think we ought to try to *do* something about it, don't you?"

So he was aware of it too. Like I said, since Tony named him one of my guardians it's changed. First it was because my marks weren't good enough like his had always been. Then he objected to some of my friends. Then something happened last spring.

Tony was away on a coaching seminar and there was this get-together at Jonathan Harding's house. I knew I wouldn't be allowed to go if Carol knew Jonathan's parents weren't home. So I didn't tell her. It wasn't as if she *asked*, because she didn't.

When I was late getting home Carol called, and when she found out there were no adults present she went crazy. She called Larry.

When I got home they were both waiting for me.

I'd never seen Larry so mad. His anger was all out of proportion, and I told him so. I guess I got a little snotty. I sometimes do. I remember that he grabbed me and slapped me. On the face.

It wasn't hard. It hardly hurt at all. But the point was he'd never slapped me. And for a minute we were both so shocked we didn't know what to do. And then he just turned and

walked out. I could hear his car careening away from the curb out front.

Carol told me then about Molly. She'd been mugged earlier that night, in Philadelphia right outside her apartment. And when he'd gotten the call Larry couldn't get anyone to cover for him in Emergency. Then Carol had called about me. So he had to wait for me in Tony's house while Molly was being treated by another doctor in another emergency room.

I thought about him speeding to Philadelphia after he left. I called him later. They'd just gotten in from the hospital. Molly was fine. Just a little dopey from what they'd given her. She sounded better than he did. And when I talked to him on the phone I cried, saying I was sorry. I kept saying it over and over.

"It's okay, Gypsy," he said. "I'm the one to be saying I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Yes, I could. And I did. But it wasn't okay. Because I couldn't stand to see him hurting like that. And I clung to the phone, sensing his pain.

The thing is this: I don't know how many times the human heart can be broken. Maybe Larry knows, with his being a doctor and all. But I know one thing. He's going for the record.

He brought Molly back to Runnymede after that. Tony got a job for her with a lawyer in town. He also let her have the apartment over the garage.

Anyway, the summer was good. Larry's world was back together again for a while.

But then last week she moved back to Philadelphia to start school again. So now Larry worries. And he stews. And he tells me I have to live defensively. And I hate it.

Because it's all different now—changed, ruined. If Larry had his way she'd be here, married to him. He believes in marriage. He tells the kids in his Human Sexuality classes that marriage means commitment.

But Molly isn't ready yet, she says. She won't be controlled. And that eats at Larry. So he controls me.

CHAPTER

4

WE PICKED Molly up at the Runnymede station after the movies. It was dark and deserted, and I walked very close to Larry.

She was the only one to get off the train. She had a permanent, one of those new styles with the ringlets all over her head, and she looked good in it. She was wearing a denim wrap-around skirt and a red knit top with some designer's name on the sleeve. Her legs were bare and brown, her feet in sandals. She had one overnight bag slung over her shoulder, and her pocketbook.

Larry practically picked her up off the ground, hugging her. He buried his face in her hair and his hands, with the strong, slender fingers, went up and down her back. Molly giggled, embarrassed. "Hiya, Nick." She pulled away.

Her grin and manner are in keeping with the rest of her. No phoney mystique; she's a regular guy. And she's so pretty! When her hair was straight she kind of looked like Princess Caroline of Monaco.

Her eyes are great; they're sparkling brown. And she's very

fashion-conscious even though she's always putting down designers. We talk about clothes a lot. And I know how she feels, about clothes and a lot of things.

She's nuts about Larry, I know that. And I wish they'd just marry and get it over with. She's the one who's hesitating, trying to make it on her own, going to law school at twenty-seven. It's the part of her that Larry can't control, but the part he loves anyway. The independence.

We squeezed into Larry's Triumph. He's getting a new car. He has it ordered, but it hasn't come in yet and he wants to give this one to Molly. But she won't take it and they have a running argument over it.

We stopped at Fhrome's for ice cream on the way home. When Larry came back to the car with it Molly had to peer into the bag. "Chocolate marshmallow! Larry, I have to watch my figure!"

"You eat the ice cream; I'll watch your figure." It was very sexy the way he said that. With all his lectures and properness, I have this sneaking feeling that Larry is a real lover.

The phone was ringing in his house when we got back. He unlocked the door, handing the ice cream to me. "Hullo, Coach, how you doin'?"

It was Tony. They chatted a while before Larry came back into the kitchen and gave me the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

I went into the living room with it and sat on the floor. "Hello, Tony."

"For God's sake, what in hell's going on there, Nick?"

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

"Larry told me what happened. For God's *sake*, Nick, I can't trust you? Every time I let you out of my sight, you gotta pull a dumb stunt? I told you *last* time, last spring when I went away and you went into your little act—I told you *then* about behaving when I wasn't around, didn't I?"

He was all tensed up, I could tell. Football practice had started today and would continue every day now until the first

game in three weeks. I mushed the ice cream around on my plate. "Yes."

"Well?"

"It wasn't my fault, Tony. I didn't want it to happen, honest."

"Don't give me *fault*. I don't wanna hear *fault*. You weren't supposed to have that kid over there, I know that."

"Tony," I said carefully, "can't it wait until I get home?" My voice broke, and he heard it and relented.

"I guess I didn't wear him out enough at practice this morning," he sighed. "Look," he said gently now, "how is Larry taking this? Are you two talking? His phone was tapped. God, Nick, his *phone*!"

"We're talking."

"And the Trotter kid died today. I saw it in the evening paper. How's he taking that?"

"Bad."

"Damned shame. I understand you're staying another night."

"Larry wants me to go to Winslow with him on Monday. He says it'll teach me things."

"Yeah, well go then. Maybe it will."

"Do I hafta, Tony? I'll miss the picnic. You guys have the whole team coming and. . . ."

"What kind of a question is that? You know you have to go if Larry says so."

"But Tony. . . ."

"No arguments, Nick. Go. And be nice to that kid. You hear?"

"I hear."

"And don't let me hear that you gave him a hard time about Jeremy, Nick. I mean it."

"Tony?"

"What?"

"I'm sleeping in Larry's room. With Molly."

"So?"

"Tony," I lowered my voice. "I know they sleep together."

Silence. Then, "Mind your own business and do as you're told."

"But he doesn't have to do that for me. I'm not a baby."

"You're his little sister. Let him handle it the way he wants. I respect his handling of it and I want no remarks out of you. I'm not fooling about any of this, Nick."

"Oh, all right."

"I'll call Monday. Maybe I can convince him to come over later and bring the kid. He can bring the whole damned school if it makes him feel any better. Be good, baby, promise?"

I could almost feel his arms around me, the way he'd hug me sometimes when I was being stubborn and he wanted a promise of goodness out of me. The thing is, Tony knows me so well. He doesn't expect me to be perfect. And when I mess up he's quick to scold, sometimes even to slap. But then, five minutes later, he's got his arms around me. He doesn't intellectualize it when I misbehave, like Larry does.

"I promise," I said.

They were sitting back in the pillows of the big couch in the sun porch, off the living room. The drapes were drawn against the windows. Only one lamp was on, and the stereo was playing. They were having coffee.

I loved this room. The tiled floor was covered with Oriental throw rugs, and the couch opened into a bed; sometimes on winter evenings when the fire was going Larry would let me sleep on the sofa-bed here. I'd shut all the lights and open the drapes and watch the trees waving outside the ceiling-to-floor windows.

Larry looked up when I came in. "What is it, Nick?"

"Tony thinks it's terrible that I can't be at the picnic tomorrow."

"I'm sure Tony will take it in stride and recover. Come kiss me good night now."

"I could sleep in here if you want me to."

He sat forward and set his cup down on the glass-topped coffee table. "That won't be necessary," he said dryly. "I'll sleep here. Why don't you go to bed?"

It was not a suggestion.

"Okay, but I'm not kissing you."

"Fine. Just go." But I could hear the hurt in his voice. I'm very good at picking things up in people's voices. You can learn a lot about them that way.

"Good night, Nick," Molly said. "I'll try not to wake you when I come up."

CHAPTER

5

LARRY HAS a queen-sized bed with a real brass headboard. I felt like a little kid in it because it's so big. The sheets were fresh and crisp because his housekeeper comes in Saturday mornings. And they were designer sheets, two shades of brown.

I love his room. I love the masculine sparseness of it, with the Oriental rug over the hardwood floors, the bookcase in the corner, the wing chair done in needlepoint, the large cherry wardrobe and the chest-on chest. He and Molly love antiques.

I was just drifting off when the phone rang. I sat up, dazed to see that the button on his doctor's line was lit up. I'm not allowed to answer on that line. I sank down again, but in a few moments there were footsteps in the hall, then the door opened.

"Nicki. It's your friend Meredith. I told her you were sleeping, but she insisted. I don't like your friends calling on that line, Nicki. I've told you that."

I sat up. "I'm sorry, Larry. I'll tell her."

"You have five minutes. No more."

I picked up the receiver. The illuminated hands on his clock said eleven forty-five.

"Hi, Nick, did I get you in trouble?"

"No. It's just that Larry doesn't like anybody using this line. So we only have a few minutes."

"I'll only be a couple of minutes. I told him I was sorry about using this number. Did you get punished?"

"Not bad. You know how Larry is. He's a pussycat. But I have to go with him on Monday to Winslow."

"That's ALL?"

"All? It's one of our last days off, Meredith. Now I have to spend it with j.d.'s. What about you?"

"What do you think?"

"Did he hit you?"

"I just wish he'd do it good one time so I could get black and blue and report him for child abuse."

"Meredith, don't, please. . . ."

"Well, what else can I do?"

"Meredith, don't cry, please. Jeez, Meredith, if you cry I'm gonna jump right out of bed and get dressed and run right over there. And I'll tell your father what I think of him! I will!"

She sniffed on the other end.

"I've got it! I know what. You can come to my house Monday night. You could stay over Tuesday. We could sleep late. I'll have Carol call your mother and invite you."

Her voice brightened. "Gee, that'd be great, Nick."

"And we'll mess around. How long has it been since we went to the supermarket and had fun filling up a cart with everything we wanted and then left it? You know we haven't done that all summer?"

"I know."

"You come over and we'll make a whole day of it. We'll do everything! Tony's got practice early Tuesday and we'll go. Then we'll do the supermarket. After that, we could go to Charmaine's and try on designer dresses. Then we'll go to St. Angela's and put Seven-Up in the holy water."

"Nick, if we get caught. . . ."

She was feeling better, I could tell. "We won't. We never

have. Then we'll get pizza dough at McCuller's. I've got some allowance left."

"Okay."

"Nick." The bedroom door opened.

"I gotta go, Meredith. I'll call tomorrow night." I slammed the phone down. "Larry—." He was starting to close the door.

"What is it?" I couldn't see all of him, just his shoulder and hand. I wanted to hug him suddenly. I felt bad for refusing to kiss him before, and now, hearing Meredith's tortured voice in the dark room, I needed reassurance.

"Could you come in for a minute?"

He hesitated for a second but then he came. He came to the side of the bed and stood there in the dark, with just a little shaft of light coming in the door. "What is it?"

"Sit down, please."

He sat. "You ought to be asleep. It's late."

I sat up. "I want to kiss you," I said. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yes, you can kiss me."

He sat very still. I put my arms around his shoulders and kissed his cheek. He didn't move. He didn't respond, and I couldn't see his expression in the dark. "Are you wearing Sea Spray?" I asked.

"No. I'm wearing something new. Molly gave it to me."

"It smells nice."

"I'm glad you like it. Is something troubling you, Gypsy?"

"Meredith's father hit her again. Because of today."

He was quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry about that. I can see why Meredith is so defiant and troublesome. I don't believe in hitting children. It goes against everything I stand for. But those are personal convictions, and what works for some people doesn't work for others."

"Larry, can you tell if a kid's been abused?"

"Yes, you usually can. The parents try to cover it up, of course. And, legally, a doctor has to be careful of accusing a parent. Little kids do bang themselves around a lot. But after a while a doctor can tell. I had a little girl in Emergency once in

Camden, and I think about her every time the subject comes up."

"Tell me about her."

"No. I shouldn't."

"Please?" I sensed a sharing with him that I hadn't felt in a long time, and I didn't want to lose it.

He shifted his weight on the bed. "She was beaten pretty badly. She was about three, blonde, blue-eyed. An angel of a child. Her face . . . there were bruises everywhere. I felt such rage at the parents. I would have taken her home for my own. Anyway, she opened her eyes to look at me, and I asked her what had happened. She wrapped her little fist around my fingers. 'I was bad,' she said. Do you believe it?"

It got quiet. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and rubbed his eyes. "Hey, come on now, to sleep. No more talk."

"What happened to her?"

"She was sent to live with foster parents."

"Did you report it?"

"Yes. Cover up, come on now."

I let him cover me. "But there are abuses that don't show, too, aren't there?" I asked him.

"Yes, and you're very astute to be aware of that, Nicki. Meredith's father has probably already inflicted those. You'll have to be a friend to her, okay?"

"You said you didn't like her."

"I'll try to be nicer. But she mistrusts most grown-ups, so you'll have to do it."

"How?"

"You know how. It's in you."

He left, but I couldn't fall asleep. I lay listening to the music that drifted upstairs, low and sad with a lot of mournful brass and a tender, sweeping anguish about it. I got up and crept out into the hall and peered over the bannister.

The lights were off, except for an eerie light from a kitchen lamp. They were dancing to the notes of a saxophone that reached right down into my soul and found all the sad places.

They looked so beautiful holding each other like that. And then Larry kissed her. I mean *really* kissed her!

The sax wore on. I ran back into the room and closed the door and jumped into bed. I fell asleep seeing my brother Larry leaning over the three-year-old girl, who had Meredith's face.

CHAPTER

6

LABOR DAY morning, Larry woke me at six-thirty. He leaned over me, shaking me. I looked up to see him standing there in his navy blue sweat pants, with nothing on top except a towel around his neck. He'd been swimming.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he had a shirt on over the sweat pants—a dress shirt, sleeves rolled up. He was making breakfast. I didn't want breakfast. I wanted a granola bar.

He spoke sharply to me. Then he burned his fingers on the coffee pot. He cursed, I ate breakfast. We did not speak.

"Start with these two cartons," he said. "Alphabetically. The A's go on top."

He was dressed in a seersucker suit and a tie. He was on his way to the hospital to do rounds. There were dark circles under his eyes, his deep velvety-brown eyes that seemed hollowed out of his own sadness. He'd been despondent since we saw Molly off at the train station Sunday night. I hate her going away. I hate it because of what it does to him.

I was sitting on the floor in his office on the white throw rug, surveying the cartons of books.

"Watch yourself when you get up and down on that chair to reach the top shelves," he directed. "I don't want any broken bones. Where are your sneakers?"

"I've got them."

"Well, put them on."

"I'm *putting* them." I was tying one, trying to figure out if he was going to be in that miserable mood all day.

He'd reached for his medical bag and was walking towards the lab area. I followed, limping, one sneaker off, one on. "Do you think we'll be back from Winslow in time for the picnic?"

"We'll see." He was opening the colorfully painted cabinets over the counter and filling up his bag with stuff. I stood by an open cabinet as he crossed the lab area. The bottom shelf of the cabinet was full of packets of pills. I picked up one packet. It was like a little plastic case with maybe twenty pills, maybe less. It looked like a dial, like something you could turn, with dates on it. "What are these, Larry?"

He glanced at me quickly. "Birth control pills."

"Why the funny little dates?"

"Why do you think?" He zipped up the bag and came over to me and held out his hand. "I'll thank you not to touch things in here without asking."

"Does the little chart move?"

"Yes, the little chart moves."

"That's adorable."

"Yes. Very." He closed the cabinet and ushered me back into his office.

"Why do you have to move the little chart?"

"To get the right date and start at the right time of month. I haven't got time to explain more now."

"Boy, I know some kids at school who would love to get their hands on those."

"Do you, now?"

"Sure. Jenny Bradshaw's older sister is *married*. And she can get them for Jenny anytime Jenny wants."

"And how old is Jenny?"

"Sixteen."

He was rummaging in the middle drawer of his desk. "Wouldn't you think I'd be able to find a damn pen that works?"

"Would you give them to me if I wanted some?"

He stopped cold. He looked at me. I think he blinked once. "That isn't funny, Nicki."

"I was only teasing."

He looked at me steadily for what seemed like an awfully long minute. "Sometimes I wonder what goes on in that head of yours," he said. He found a pen, put it in his jacket pocket and closed and locked his desk. "I'll be back by ten. Get busy. Don't answer the phone. The exchange will take it. Dr. Amberson is covering for me the rest of the weekend. And don't wander around. Is that clear?"

"Uh huh."

He stood in the doorway looking at me, his bag in his hand, uncertainty on his face like a shadow. Uncertainty in his eyes. Something new in them now besides his own anguish. "Behave yourself, dammit," he said. Then he was gone.

Winslow is a cluster of low, yellow cinder-block buildings with flat roofs. There were few, if any, trees. That depressed me right off. If there is anything I can't stand, it's a place without trees.

The grounds were deserted. It was creepy and I didn't like it. "Where is everybody, Larry?"

"Most of the boys have gone home for the weekend. They're allowed to go home when they've proven themselves trustworthy."

"What about Jeremy?"

"He misbehaved last week and lost his privileges."

"How?"

"One of the kids smuggled in pot, and he was caught smoking." We got out of the car, he locked it, and we started across the lot.

"Where does he live?"

"In Trenton. With his mother. He doesn't have a father."

"Does he miss his mother?"

"They all do. No matter how bad the home situation is."

My mouth was dry. The sun was hot. It was midday now, and I felt light-headed and hungry. The sun was bouncing off the yellow buildings. The blacktop beneath our feet was burning. I was grateful that I'd worn a cotton skirt and summer top instead of jeans. Larry wouldn't have allowed jeans anyway. Not when I go out with him. He's very strict about that.

"What's his mother like?"

"Young. Never married to the father. On Welfare. She has a boyfriend. She loves the kid, but can't cope with him. He was reading at third-grade level when he came here four months ago. In the three months I've been coming, his reading level has picked up almost to par. So has his math. Come, we'll go to the administration building where the kids meet their visitors."

It was cooler inside the building. We went into a room marked "Reception." There were colorful chairs and tables and a couple of vending machines, everything bright and plastic.

"Can I have a Coke?"

"No," Larry said. "Wait until later."

"How did Jeremy steal the car?"

"He just stole it. Some older kids put him up to it because they figured he wouldn't get in trouble if he got caught. They were waiting for him a couple of blocks away. He already knows how to get into a locked car in a couple of minutes and start it."

"How does he know how to drive?"

"When you're hungry you can do anything. You'd be surprised how well. Ah, here he is now. . . ."

The boy in the doorway looked awfully small for twelve. He was in dungarees and a knit shirt. He held a baseball cap in his hand. His sneakers were brand new. In the other hand he held some papers.

"Hello, Dr. Larry," he said.

My brother was standing by the window looking out. He half-turned. "Hello, Jeremy. Come on in here."

The boy came in.

"This is my sister, Nicki. I've told you about her."

"Hello, Nicki." His eyes were huge and brown, and he was very handsome. His skin was lightly bronzed and his teeth were even and white. But the eyes were the best. They were fastened on Larry. His eyes were filled up with Larry. But it seemed like an eternity before Larry spoke.

What was wrong with Larry? I could feel the tension in the room. This pathetic little kid had his eyes glued on Larry, waiting. And then he turned from the window finally, my brother, and sat down. "Come here."

The boy came.

Larry sort of hunched forward, elbows resting on his knees. "You've been in trouble," he said. "I had to do some fast talking to get you out of here today for a few hours. To even *see* you."

Jeremy said nothing. Good for you, I thought, you know how to play it, kid.

"Smoking pot!" Larry's voice crackled with disgust. "Is that dumb and stupid? Is it?"

Jeremy blinked, holding back the tears. I moved. I started to get up.

"Where are you going?" Larry looked at me.

"I want a Coke."

"Sit still, please."

I flung him a dirty look. If there's anything I can't stand, it's when grown-ups yell at a kid in front of somebody else. That drives me absolutely crazy.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" he was saying to Jeremy now, "Did you like it? The pot? Did it make you happy?"

"No. It made me sick."

"You're lying. It didn't make you sick. It'd take a hell of a

lot more than that to make you sick. And you'll smoke it again the first chance you get. I hate your lying to me more than I hate your smoking pot."

I was horrified, but the boy didn't object. He just kept holding onto those stupid papers.

"Who needs to come once a week and see a lying kid who says he's your friend and wants to square up, and then smokes pot behind your back?" Larry was saying. "I tell the administration I've got a handle on you, then you go and do this. And I look like a fool."

Two huge tears rolled down Jeremy's face. Larry took out his handkerchief then and gave it to him. "Here, wipe your lying face."

The kid took it and wiped his face. "What have you got in your hand?" Larry asked now. The voice was more gentle. Jeremy handed over the papers. They looked like schoolwork, math problems. Larry looked at them. He took a long time looking. I'll say that for him, anyway.

"These are pretty good. But if you smoke pot you won't be able to do this anymore. It messes up your brain cells. You go out in the street and somebody picks a fight and they'll break your face."

"No!" Jeremy said, defiantly now. "Nobody will break my face. Ever!"

"They'll hit you in the head with a baseball bat."

"I won't smoke it anymore! I promise!"

"Yeah. Your promises. I've heard your promises. They'll not only break your face, they'll stab you. Some doctor will have to sew you up in Emergency some night. Maybe me."

"I *promise!*" Jeremy said. "I'll square up. My word, I give to you!"

Larry put the school papers into his jacket pocket. He took out a cigarette and lit it nonchalantly. "People like you don't have a word. No word to give," he said softly. "You have to scrounge for your word every day. I saw enough of that when I

was in Camden. I sewed up enough people like you in Emergency.''

''For you I will give my word,'' Jeremy said again. ''For you I will make it new! Every day!''

Through the smoke from his cigarette Larry regarded him, satisfied now. He nodded approvingly. ''Have you signed out?''

''No, sir.''

''Then go do it. And we'll go to lunch.''

The boy left quickly. Larry stayed in the chair, ignoring me. I went and stood next to him. ''How *could* you! How could you speak to him like that?''

He raised his eyes to look at me. ''He understands that kind of talk,'' he said.

''I think you were rotten to him.''

''Be quiet.''

''I won't!''

He got up and went to the window and looked out. ''You're not here on a jaunt today,'' he said. ''Remember that. Remember why you're here, will you? And when we go to lunch, talk to him. And listen. Maybe you'll learn how lucky you are.''

CHAPTER

7

"NICK?"

"What, Meredith?"

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to have sex with Jeff."

I closed my eyes. I did not want to hear this now. The lamplight was making a pleasant glow in my room, and I was just starting to feel good for the first time in two days. You know how you go along for days, or weeks even, just doing what you have to do and being pushed through the days by everything that's happening—all the time feeling that you are not going to make it?

Well, lying there in my room on one of the twin beds, freshly showered, with the windows open and a slight breeze moving the organdy curtains, I felt good.

I was reading the special section in the local paper on "Scholastic Football Previews." It had stories on all the schools the paper covered, about a dozen of them. "What Will DeBonis Do for an Encore?" the headline over the story on Runnymede High said. And there was a picture of Tony. He was yelling.

"They say in this story that Tony DeBonis doesn't have

enough lettermen for a pick-up game of basketball," I said. "That's a pack of lies. We have lots of good guys. Sure, Tony only has eleven seniors on his roster, but he's got thirty-three juniors and twenty sophomores. Just because we were unbeaten two years in a row they're not gonna let him be. And that's a lousy picture of Tony. He's yelling."

"He's always yelling," Meredith said.

I ignored that. "He says in the story here that Jeff has been throwing well. There's a picture of Jeff too."

She leaped off the other bed and came to lean on mine. "Where? Ohhh, can I have it?"

"Get your own copy, Meredith. Carol keeps everything for a scrapbook."

My room has windows that look out on the back and side of Tony's house, and below us on the patio Tony and Carol and Assistant Coach Hedden and his wife were having iced coffee. Everyone had left; the picnic was over.

Summer sounds were coming in my window now; a car gunning it down the street, the bark of a dog, the slam of a screen door. We finished reading the article about Tony and the football team. Then I folded the paper up, put it on my night table, and turned off the lamp. The glow of my digital clock-radio pierced the dark. Meredith went to lie down on the other bed. She was smoking. I didn't like that, but there wasn't much I could do about it except hope she would ditch it if somebody came up.

"Did you hear what I said?" she persisted.

"I don't wanna hear it, Meredith. Because you're not going to do it. You just like the way it sounds."

"How do you know I'm not gonna do it?"

"I tell you, Meredith, you're crazy if you do."

"Why? Wouldn't you? If you loved somebody, I mean."

"I don't know about love. I know I wouldn't go to bed with just anybody. Larry says you have to be mature emotionally, or you can really get messed up inside your head."

"He's trying to scare you 'cause you're his little sister."

"No. We always did talk serious about stuff like that."

She sighed. "You're lucky. My mom would flake out if I even mentioned it."

"Yeah, well I guess I am lucky."

She was quiet for a moment. Then, "Would you do it if Eric insisted?"

"Eric wouldn't ask me something like that."

"Yeah, well, maybe not, especially with the problem *you* two have."

I sat up. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, come on, Nick, I'm not saying I believe it, but the rumor *is* going around about why your brother is taking such an interest in Eric."

"He doesn't do any more for Eric than for any of the other guys on the team," I said evenly, "and if he does, it's because Eric doesn't have a father. And because. . . ." I stopped, tears in my voice. "Damn it, Meredith, who's been saying things?"

"Jeez, I'm sorry I mentioned it. It's just a dumb rumor. Everybody knows that. You know they're always starting rumors about Tony, how he's going to quit Runnymede High and coach at some big deal college. Every year they start that! It's just too bad, after you guys have been going together for months, that people had to start this. Is it . . . you know . . . making things awful between you?"

I settled back, watching the play of car lights from the street on my ceiling. "Eric doesn't say much, but it's on his mind," I said. "And he's starting to get awful tense around Tony. Like he doesn't know how to act all of a sudden. It doesn't make things too beautiful, Meredith."

"Jeez, Nick, what a bummer."

"S'okay. We'll get through it. What about *you*, though. Why do you wanna get involved like that with Jeff?"

" 'Cause I love him. And he loves me. And he's maybe the only person in the whole world who loves me." There was a catch in her voice.

I couldn't argue with love. Sex I could argue with. But not love. "I still think you're crazy, Meredith. What if you get pregnant?"

"I won't. It's just that I don't think I'll be able to say no to Jeff much longer. I'm not even sure I want to. You won't think less of me, will you, Nick?"

"Oh, jeez, Meredith, it's not what I think that counts. I don't wanna see you get pregnant. You gonna ask Jenny Bradshaw's sister to get you pills?"

"I can't. Jenny said her sister can get just so many, even if she is married."

"My brother has them in his office," I said absent-mindedly. "I saw them."

"No kidding. Would he give you some?"

"Oh, God, you're crazy, Meredith, you know that? You're certifiable. Larry gets spastic if I even joke around about stuff like that."

"Nick, I don't want to go to a clinic. I just couldn't go into one of those places and ask for them. What would Larry say if you wanted the pills for a friend?"

"He'd say my friend should go to a doctor. Or a clinic. And if you didn't want to do that you shouldn't have sex. Anyway, I'm not asking Larry. I'm in enough trouble with him. I still have to finish putting those books on the shelves in his office."

"When?"

"Maybe next Saturday. I want to finish the job before football starts. And I want to sleep now. I'm getting a headache just thinking about all this. So turn off the radio, huh? And put out the cigarette, please?"

I got under my sheets and got comfortable.

"Where did you see the pills in Larry's office, Nick?" her voice came in the dark.

"In the lab area. He has all kinds of stuff. Samples."

"Does he keep it locked?"

"Meredith," I pleaded, "don't. Please."

"Just one packet, Nick. He'd never miss it."

"You're *nuts*!" I propped myself up on my elbow. "Steal them? Larry would decimate me!"

"It wouldn't be stealing. He's your brother. It's not like he'd bring charges against you or anything."

"No." I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it. Now shut up and go to sleep."

"Don't be sore, Nick. We're friends, and friends are supposed to be able to ask each other things. All I want is one lousy little packet of pills. Your brother's got *millions*. I'd do it for you. Don't you remember last year when we had Tony in class and your crib sheet fell to the floor and I said it was mine?"

"I remember." She *would* bring that up.

"He expected something like that from me. Not from you. He'd have killed you, Nick."

"I didn't even use the old crib sheet. I've never cheated in my life."

"Would Tony have believed that?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Nobody can cheat in one of Tony's classes anyway, the way he polices the place. God, I don't even know why I made it. Just to feel secure, I guess."

She giggled then, and I started giggling too. "I was so scared, the way he came down the aisle and picked it up. Then you, telling him it was yours."

We giggled some more. "You had to write ten thousand words on the value of honesty," I remembered.

"It took me a week, Nick. I couldn't find ten thousand words on the value of honesty."

I sighed and looked across the dark at her. "Oh, I don't know, Meredith. I'd like to help you. If you get pregnant, that would be worse."

"One little packet, Nick. After that we're going to figure out something else to do."

"Oh, Jesus," I rolled over on my side. "I don't want to talk about it anymore now. Please, Meredith. Oh, Jesus."

It was not taking the Lord's name in vain. And I'm sure that even Tony would have understood. It was more of a prayer than anything.

CHAPTER

8

THE PHONE dragged me out of sleep the next morning. It rang, once, twice. I fumbled for it, my hand groping through the cobwebs of my unconsciousness. "'Lo?"

"Nick, you up?"

Eric's voice, low and achingly familiar, propelling me awake. "I am now."

"You coming to practice?"

"Sure. Meredith too."

"It was one of the best picnics we had, yesterday."

"I know. Everybody said. I'm so *mad* at Larry 'cause I couldn't get there earlier."

"Is Coach sore at you because of what happened with the phone call? Dumb Torrensano, he should have known better."

"He was busy last night with the guests so I don't know."

"You missed the raw clams."

"I know. I can't believe the cheerleaders downed them." It was a tradition at Tony's Labor Day picnic, the players eating raw clams. It's kind of a macho thing the guys do, egging each other on. But this was the first year the cheerleaders tried it."

"Our first game is with Oak Ridge. Coach has films of their playoff game with Spartensburg last year, so we can see their weaknesses. You wanna do something tonight?"

"You're on curfew." Tony often checked up on his players, calling their houses to see if they were home. Spot checks. They never knew when to expect the calls either.

"Well, maybe if practice goes good he'll let up the last night before school. I'll see you later."

"Sure."

In three weeks we'd have our first football game. It would be on a Friday night. The lights in the stadium would be brighter than daylight. Assembling on the sidewalk outside the field, the band, in blue and white, would be beating drums in anticipation. People would be climbing into the stands with blankets. Then, in a burst of applause and music, the team would run out onto the field through the banner the cheerleaders held. Tony would be running right along with them. The people would go crazy.

I was on the yearbook staff as official photographer for the team, so I'd be there on the field too. It occurred to me that I ought to take the camera to practice today. I jumped out of bed, put on my bra and panties and a pair of cut-offs, and an old army shirt of Tony's. It was way too big on me, but kids were paying good money for this kind of stuff in army-navy outlets. I brushed my teeth, ran a comb through my hair, and went downstairs barefoot.

Tony was making breakfast. Carol was seated on the blue flowered cushions at the breakfast nook, reading the paper and drinking coffee. It's sweet the way Tony makes breakfast on weekends. He says if Larry can do it he can. Carol says he's getting his consciousness raised.

"Hi," I said.

Tony looked at me. "How's the juvenile delinquent?" And he held out his arm and drew me close and hugged me tight. "Everything okay?"

"Uh huh." It's like coming home every time Tony hugs me like that. And we have years behind us, years of arguments and tears, of pullings-apart and comings-together. Years of moments when his stern demands made me hate him, nothing less.

We've had fights that should have been staged in Madison Square Garden. They would have sold out the house. But always he'd allow me to talk back. Always he'd listen and be fair.

He released me and gave me a rap on the seat of my cut-offs. "Get me a plate for this stuff, will you?"

I went for one. "Hello, Carol."

"Morning, Nick. Where's Meredith?"

"Sleeping."

"Well, breakfast is now," Tony said. He was putting bacon strips on paper toweling on the plate. "She takes pot luck later. How many eggs, Carol?"

"Two." She was absorbed in the paper. Her dark hair, worn parted in the middle, was done in a blunt cut that went to her chin line and flattered her face. She dresses very plain, very classy, and she's the perfect coach's wife.

They've been married eleven years now. They met in college and were married before Tony went to Vietnam in '68. But it hasn't been an easy marriage for them. It's just that they've tried so hard to make it work. Carol was reluctant to have a baby for a long time because she knew she tended towards a drinking problem. It originated out of her loneliness when Tony was in Nam. She'd had it under control until a couple of years ago. Then she lost their first baby because of it. She went for counseling, got on top of the problem, then started counseling other problem drinkers. She went back to college for her degree in psychology. And now she's going for her master's, and she's on the Child Study Team at Runnymede High.

"Filmore's has a Labor Day sale on shoes, Nick," she said. "You want to come?"

"No thanks. Meredith and I have plans today."

Tony looked at me quickly. "What kind of plans?"

"Just messing around." I looked at him innocently. "Can we come to practice?"

"I'd do better without a couple of girls hanging around." But he smiled, breaking the eggs in the pan. "Yes, if you stay out of the way. Put in the toast, come on now, give a hand. Practice is at eight-thirty, so you'd better wake Meredith to eat."

"She never eats breakfast."

"No wonder that girl is so mixed up. If she were mine she'd eat."

"She'd rather sleep. I'll wake her up about a quarter of eight."

We settled down to eat. Tony leaned back against the cushions, buttering his toast, sipping his coffee. "You ready for school?"

I made a face at him.

"No fooling around this year. No going out on weeknights. You have to make at least a good B-plus average this year if you want to get into college."

"You sound like Larry."

"Larry wants A's. I know better." He looked at me over his coffee. "How'd you leave it with him? I hope you two are talking."

"We're talking."

He nodded approvingly. "How was Winslow? And the kid? How'd you like the kid?"

"He's a nice kid, but I never saw anybody so nuts over Larry."

"Look who's talking." He winked at Carol. "Am I to understand that she's resigned as president of the Larry DeBonis Fan Club?"

"He's been getting to me lately," I said. "He wants me to be perfect, just 'cause I'm his sister."

He looked at me. "Maybe I'm over-simplifying, but I don't think perfection is what he wants. I think that if you made an attempt at behaving he would be happy."

I looked at my plate.

"You and Larry have something very rare between you. But you're both growing. And that can be painful. I think, however, that your relationship can withstand it. And he's responsible for you now and he takes that very seriously."

"That's just it," I said. "He doesn't have to."

He was looking at me steadily, sipping his coffee. "Yes, he does, and he's sensible enough to know it. He told me last night that when his place is finished he wants you with him one weekend a month. I think he can have some damned fine influence on you, Nicki, so I said yes." He winked at Carol. "Of course, I'm more than glad to be rid of you, especially now that we're having a baby." Carol was three months pregnant.

But I knew he was teasing, and he knew that I knew it. It was neat seeing them looking at each other like that, though, with his hand over hers on the table, wrapped in a look that was like a gauzy tent around them.

"How are you feeling, Carol?" I asked politely.

"Fine, Nick. Never better, thanks."

"Do you want a boy or a girl, Tony?" I asked my brother.

"It doesn't matter."

"I'll bet you want a boy. All men want sons."

"Girls are nice too," he said, kind of shy-like. "And Lord knows, I have enough experience with you." He frowned then. "Some of them don't stay nice, though. They grow up and have to go to juvenile court and testify against their friends."

Oh, he was sneaky. I looked down at my plate. "The trooper told Larry maybe I won't have to go to court. Maybe it won't be necessary."

"The whole trip was unnecessary, Nick. It was dumb."

"Excuse me." Carol got up. "If you two are going to get into this, I'm going to get dressed."

"Sure, hon," and he got up so she could get out of the

booth. When she left he looked at me. "She's right, you know. I'm not too happy with you because of what happened, but I didn't want to raise a fuss in front of her. I think whatever fusses we raise we ought to do in private from now on."

I nodded. "Is she going to be okay this time, Tony?"

"Yes," he said gently, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "The doctor says she'll be fine. And thank you for being concerned—and for all the little things you've been doing around the house to help out. Don't think I haven't noticed, sweetie. But look here, this thing with Larry . . . I don't want to scold, and I promised myself I wouldn't. I'm sure Larry did enough of that, right?"

"Kind of."

He smiled. "He let you off too light, and I told him so. But it's always been difficult for him to be the heavy with you. Nick, he's been so damned good to you, he doesn't deserve what happened."

"I know."

He pushed his plate aside. "At any rate, he said he'd go to court with you if you have to go." He started to say something else, but Carol came back then. She was dressed now. "Can you two clean up?" she asked prettily.

"Just because you're pregnant doesn't mean a free ride," Tony said. But he hugged her around the waist, and took his wallet out and put it on the table. "How much is this expedition going to cost me today?" But he liked giving her money, you could tell. He got some money out and laid it on the table. "That enough?"

"Fine."

"Don't overdo it, huh? It's gonna be hot today. And take my car. Yours doesn't have air conditioning. And I want to get that back tire checked on yours anyway."

"We'll be done by noon," she said. "Then we're going to lunch. When are you showing the films of the Oak Ridge game?"

"Thought I might do it Friday night. That okay?"

"You doing it here?" She was at the sink, getting a drink to take her vitamins with.

"If you don't mind the kids around."

"Since when have I minded? I just want to make sure we have enough Coke and pretzels." She grabbed her purse and went out the kitchen door.

"C'mon," Tony said, "I'll clear, you rinse and stack."

He cleared the table and put the stuff in the refrig while I rinsed the dishes. "Can I go to the movies tonight with Eric?" I asked.

He scowled. "No. Tomorrow's school. Anyway, Eric's got a nine o'clock curfew."

I shut off the water and looked at him. "You don't like my going out with Eric so much, do you, Tony?"

He was leaning over, moving some stuff around in the fridge and he straightened up now, the milk carton still in his hand, and he looked at me.

I held my breath. I'd never asked him about the rumor. I hadn't intended to now.

"Nick," he said gently, "I don't mind you going out with Eric as long as you both know how to behave. And as long as it doesn't interfere with your schoolwork or your chores."

The grey-blue eyes were untroubled and sincere. For an instant, I thought that maybe he didn't know about the rumor. But not much escapes Tony.

"Can Eric come over tonight for a while?" I asked.

He'd found a place for the milk. He shoved it in and closed the door. "If he does well in practice and asks me, real polite-like, I might say yes."

"Oh, Tony." I shoved the last dish in the dishwasher and closed it up. "You always try to act like you're so tough."

He walked past me. "Any rumors you hear to the contrary are absolutely unfounded and come from an unreliable source." He pulled my hair, then walked to the screen door, turned and looked at me. "Go wake your friend. I've got to run over to the gas station. Be ready to leave in half an hour."

But the word "rumor" stayed with me. And so did the term, "unfounded." And "unreliable source." Was he trying to tell me something? The tears came to my eyes, wondering.

CHAPTER

9

"HOW'S THE shoulder, Eric? I handed him a glass of iced tea and set a plate of chocolate chip cookies on the patio table.

"S'okay, thanks." He was straddling the blue-flowered chaise lounge. I sat down on a nearby chair.

"Tony says some of you guys are hurting."

"Nah." He shrugged modestly, working the shoulder around. "The guys were just moaning in the locker room. Everybody's okay. We're a cinch to beat Ridge. Game's in the bag."

"Tony says it was a good practice, but you're all too confident. He told Carol at dinner that the team is too cocky. That you'll have to get beat before you settle down."

He looked at me, eyes narrowed. "Coach said that?"

"Yes." I felt the color rising to my face. I knew I shouldn't be telling this. Private talk from Tony about the team, whether with Carol or assistant coaches who regularly stopped by for meetings, was just that. Private. I was privy to it only because Tony trusted me never to repeat it.

Eric reached for a cookie and bit into it, flashing me an in-

solent smile that showed strong white teeth. "Funny. Coach told us it was a good practice."

"I shouldn't have said that," I amended. "I'm not supposed to repeat stuff like that."

He continued chewing. "A guy learns all kinds of stuff dating the coach's sister."

"Oh, stop it, Eric. That isn't why you date me."

"Why do I then, huh?" He reached over and pulled my hair, his hand touching the side of my face as he withdrew it.

I got all weak inside when he did that. He is brown-haired and good-looking, with very large, dreamy eyes. His face is too thin, but Carol says it will fill out later. Tony says it will fill out sooner than later if he keeps eating like he does out of our refrigerator.

In build, he is actually one of the slighter players on the team. Oh, his shoulders are more than respectable. Almost as good as my brother Larry's. And the span of them sometimes measures a longing in me that is very sad and I do not understand.

Slight or not, though, he can run. And when he does, when he gets hold of that ball and runs through the middle, weaving his way for a touchdown, nobody can stop him. The people in the stands yell and go crazy. And Tony is counting on him running for him this year. I know how much Tony is counting on him.

"Sometimes I don't know why you do date me," I said.

"Now what kind of a thing is that to say? Come on, don't be sore. You know I was only teasing."

"I'm not sore." Something soft and sweet lingered in the September air. Sounds of the six o'clock news drifted out the open windows. Tony was watching the news. Carol was upstairs putting away summer clothes. Tomorrow school started. I felt the loss of summer with a pang of sadness.

"I wish," I said fervently, "that I had a mother and father like normal people and that my brother wasn't the football coach."

"I have a mother and father like normal people and they're divorced," Eric said. "At least that's what they tell me."

I felt the sharp intake of my own breath. "Eric, don't."

He swirled his tea in his glass. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't have. You said you were either going to ask him about it or stop talking about it. You *promised*, Eric."

He hunched his shoulders forward disconsolately. "I can't ask him, Nick. I just can't. No matter what people say or how much they say it, I can't ask him that. Would *you* ask him something like that?"

"I don't believe the rumor. You do."

His face got red. "I didn't say I believed it."

"Well, you never said you didn't believe it."

He looked so miserable, so confused and torn I almost felt sorry for him. "Nick, Coach has been so good to me, I. . . ."

"If you believe it, even the slightest bit, and you don't ask him, we have to stop going out. You know that, don't you?"

He looked down.

"Eric, we could be *related* !"

"Aw, Nick, that's dumb."

"Is it? Not if you believe what people are saying."

Silence for a minute. Then, "Okay. You're right. I'll do it. Clear the air. Coach is always one for clearing the air. You wanna take a cruise downtown with me later?"

"He won't let us. He already said that."

"Well, I'll ask him that first. For starters."

Tony came out then, slamming the screen door behind him. He stood on the patio with his hands in his jeans pockets. "How's the shoulder, Eric?"

"Fine, Coach, no sweat." Right off, Eric stood up. Like he was on a spring or something. And he stood there, arms folded across his chest, shifting his weight from one sneakered foot to the other—like Tony had only to give the word and he'd make a hundred-yard dash across the lawn.

My brother inclined his head slightly and I saw the faint smile, the gleam of fondness in his eyes. "You wouldn't admit

it if it weren't fine, would you, Scherer?'' And something flashed between them then, some look of mutual understanding. ''What are you two kids up to?'' Tony asked lightly.

''Thought maybe I'd take Nicki for a soda, Coach. Last night before school, you know. Everybody's out.''

''You mean my team's out carousing around tonight?''

''Just messin' around, you know, Coach.''

''Yeah, well I don't want you two out messing around. I told you that, Eric. I've also told Nicki. You got any arguments about that, young lady?'' He looked at me.

I looked at him defiantly. ''I think it's mean.''

''Would you like to go inside and discuss it? Just you and me?''

''No.''

''Fine. Well, I've gotta get over to the school and get some things in shape for tomorrow. Why don't you move your wreck, Scherer, so I can get out of my driveway?''

''Sure, Coach.''

I walked to the driveway with them. Tony got into his two-year-old Pontiac hard-top. The license plates said, DEVILS-1. The senior class had given him the plates last spring because the football and basketball teams were unbeaten for the second year going. Runnymede football and basketball teams are called the Blue Devils.

Tony slammed the door, put the key in the ignition, and sat idling the motor while Eric backed his car out and parked in the street. ''What's wrong?'' He looked at me.

''Nothing.''

''You been crying?'' He touched my face.

''No.''

''These kids are tuned up now, Nick for the start of the season. I want them that way. There's tension and pressure. Channeled properly, it wins games. But it's there. That's one reason I don't want you two out tonight. Understand?''

''Uh huh.''

Eric came walking back to stand beside me. Backing down

the drive, Tony waved. "Nine o'clock, I'll be home, Scherer. I'm calling. If your mom answers I'm asking to speak to you."

We watched him pull away. Eric looked down at me. "You wanna go to Carielo's for pizza?"

He didn't have to ask twice.

CHAPTER

10

I SAW THE kids from Oak Ridge even before we got into the door of Carielo's. Eric was locking up his Mustang, and I was standing just outside the huge multi-paned window with the red-checkered curtains. I saw Eddie Brokaw and Buddy Perkins through one of the maple-framed panes.

We were inside the double doors before Eric saw them. He hesitated for a second, then took my hand. "C'mon, we'll sit across the aisle."

Carielo's is considered one of the nicer pizza places in town. It has real red-checkered tablecloths and make-believe Tiffany lamps and a working fireplace. After football games on Friday nights it's mobbed. There's a bar, but parents don't mind their kids eating there because Frank Carielo, the owner, would never allow them to be served. He knows all the kids by name. He knows their parents, too.

Two other features Carielo's has are the over-sized TV and the free baskets of hot popcorn. As Eric held my hand, we crossed in front of the TV screen, ducking.

"Outa the way, Scherer, you're not runnin' for a touchdown now. C'mon, man, clear the field!" It was Buddy Perkins. I

recognized his overbearing voice. I turned and, through the dimness and the flickering from the TV, saw Oak Ridge's star quarterback leering at us.

"Hey, who's he with?" Brokaw asked.

"The coach's sister," Perkins said. "Who'd you think?"

"Aw, ain't that sweet. Hey, Scherer, why don'tcha come and sit closer. We ain't gonna corrupt her."

"Lay off." Eric waved them off, and we slid into our booth. The waitress came over with the basket of popcorn and the menus immediately. I scanned my menu like I'd never seen it before, even though Eric and I came here often.

"They're all beered up, Eric."

"I know. They must have come in that way."

"Hey, Scherer, one way to stay on the coach's good side, man! Go out with the kid sister!"

Eric looked at me. "You wanna go?"

"No. I just want my pizza."

With the exception of Perkins and Brokaw and a middle-aged couple, the place was empty. The waitress took our order right off—one large pizza with everything on it and two Cokes.

It was after she left that I smelled the sweetly sickening and unmistakable odor drifting across the aisle at us.

"Eric," I whispered.

"I know. They're smoking it right out in the open, too."

"Hey, Scherer, we're gonna beat your ass in three weeks, you know that, don'tcha? Oak Ridge is gonna roll right over Runnymede's two-year winning streak. What ya got to say to that, pretty boy? Coach won't let ya date his sister anymore after you mess up on the field."

Eric started to get up.

"No." I grabbed his hand.

"No way I'm gonna take that!" I could see the tension and pressure Tony had told me about earlier in the whiteness of his lips, the look in his eyes.

"That's just what they *want*, Eric."

"So that's just what they're gonna get."

But before he could get out of the booth Old Man Carielo had come over from his post behind the cash register. Old Man Carielo never raised his voice with the kids. He was bald, he wore a white apron, and as he circulated in the restaurant saying hello to the customers he wasn't above wiping off a table or two along the way. He often sent kids home when he knew they were out too late. He was particularly mindful of the curfew for the football and basketball teams, which was why none of the football team was here tonight.

"Hello, Nicki," he came down the aisle. "Eric."

"Hello, Mr. Carielo," we said in unison.

He paused at our table. "Getting prettier every day, this little girl here," he told Eric. "I remember her since she was so big." and he held his hand waist high. "Been coming in with her brother since then, right, Nicki?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"So when is school?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. Okay. Nine o'clock I throw everybody out."

He moved away, across the aisle to where the Oak Ridge kids were. He stood in front of Perkins and Brokaw now, drawing himself up to his full five feet. "The pot. It goes," he said.

"Whatcha talkin' about, Carielo?" Perkins said.

"*Mr.* Carielo to you." But the voice remained soft. "You come in here all tanked up and you start right away with the pot. Put it out or I call the cops."

"Have your own place raided?" Buddy Perkins challenged. "C'mon, you know better."

Old Man Carielo glared at them for a full second. "You got five minutes," he said. "Five minutes after I go back to the register I make the call." Then he turned and started back.

Their snickers followed him. I saw Eric's intake of breath. "C'mon, you guys," he said, "give him a break."

"You gonna make us, Scherer? You better watch out or you'll get that pretty face of yours messed up. Then your old man'll have to come and take you both home." It was Perkins.

I saw the muscle in Eric's jaw twitch.

"You know who I mean, Scherer, "the voice floated across the aisle to us, tauntingly. "Her big brother and your old man."

Eric was out of the booth like a shot and it all happened in three seconds. Both Perkins and Brokaw were on their feet by the time he got there.

For hours afterwards I would be able to close my eyes and see the scene as if in instant replay in slow motion. Brokaw and Perkins swinging—first one, then the other—at Eric, who caught first one, then the other blow on his face. He managed, only partially, to deflect the blows aimed at him. For hours afterwards I would see Eric going down, hear my scream as he grabbed the side of the booth and recovered himself and gained his footing and started delivering some good shots of his own.

Eric was like a madman. One shot caught Perkins right in the eye, sending him sprawling against the back of the pine booth. He hit his head against it with a loud thud. Then, not even stopping at all, Eric whirled and, with his arms outstretched and his hands clenched in front of him, swung full force and slammed Brokaw in the chest.

Somehow, in the middle of all this, the basket of popcorn went flying. And I screamed again.

Mr. Carielo was there in a second, separating them. "Okay, okay, boys, let's save it for the gridiron. Enough, I said. Boys! Enough!" He was in between Eric and Brokaw now, stopping them, calming them with his voice. Perkins was slumped in the booth, holding his head. I ran to Eric and grabbed his arm.

"Eric, stop, please!" He stopped. He wound down at the sound of my voice, the wildness in his eyes fading as he focused his gaze on me.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Carielo," he said.

"You should be. Fighting like hoods! I don't tolerate such behavior in my place! You take out a nice little girl like this and get into a fight? Go over there and sit down, both of you!"

I led Eric back to our booth. I took some ice from my Coke

and put it in my napkin and gave it to him for his face, which was starting to swell.

Mr. Carielo was ushering Perkins and Brokaw to the door with punctuated warnings of what would happen if they came into his place in such a condition again. Somewhere along the line the middle-aged couple had left.

"So, big-deal star running back, how does it feel to be Muhammad Ali?" Old Man Carielo said.

"It doesn't feel so good." Eric was holding his face.

"Eric, maybe we better go to the emergency room," I said worriedly. "You don't look so good."

"I don't wanna."

"Larry's on tonight."

"Great, that's all I need, your brother Larry to know about this."

"Just keep the ice on it, and take the little girl home," Mr. Carielo said. "You got enough to worry about when Tony finds out. Look, son, I'll call her brother and tell him it wasn't your fault. You want me to do that?"

"I can handle things with Coach," Eric said.

"Oh, you can handle things with Coach, huh? Well, Mr. Big Shot, I know Coach longer than you know Coach, and I know he doesn't look fondly on his boys fighting. You got more guts than brains, you know that?"

"He's right, Eric," I said. "It's better Tony hears it from somebody he knows before we get home."

He agreed and we left. It was eight-thirty then, and we went out into the cool night air, which made Eric feel better. We decided to drive around for a while to give Mr. Carielo time to get Tony when he got home at nine. And it would give us time to think.

CHAPTER

11

WE PULLED into our driveway about nine-twenty. The minute we did the light went on in the kitchen in back. Eric cut the motor and we sat there in the dark with only the sound of the katydids around us.

He'd been quiet while we drove around town. All the time I'd known what he was thinking about though—Perkins's remark about Tony being his old man. I hadn't said anything. Years of experience with my brothers when they didn't want to talk had taught me that.

"I don't want Coach to know why we fought tonight," he said now in the car.

"Okay, Eric."

"Don't tell him. Not even if he makes you."

"He won't make me, Eric. That isn't how Tony is. But even if he did, I wouldn't tell."

He was looking at me now. He moved on the seat, half-turning, his arm resting lightly on my shoulders. "You're so different from most girls, you know that? Any other girl would have been hysterical, crying tonight. You're tough in a way. And yet so many of them try to be tough. In the wrong ways. Can I kiss you, Nick?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask, Eric."

He kissed me. It was as light as a butterfly's wings on my lips. I got all weak inside.

The patio light went on now. "I guess we better go in," he said.

Going in was the last thing I wanted to do. Not because I was afraid of Tony, but because of the way I was feeling about Eric. I'd told myself so many times I'd never get this way over a boy. None of that idiot groping and carrying on so many girls I knew did. There had never been anybody I wanted to do it with, anyway. Most of the boys I knew were immature and loud-mouthed. With my brothers as role models, I'd always been attracted to somebody who acted older, more mature. Like Eric.

"We'd better go in," I said, moving towards the door.

He held onto my hand. "I'll take the blame for tonight. For taking you out, I mean."

"He won't let you, Eric. He'll hold me responsible too."

"Jeez." He closed his eyes. "What'll he do to you?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. He'll yell a lot. It won't be too bad. C'mon."

They were both in the kitchen, Tony and Carol. Carol was in her robe, pouring coffee at the counter. Tony was leaning against the counter, a cup in his hand. He raised the cup slowly to his lips when we came in, took a sip, and looked at us over the rim of the cup, swallowing slowly.

"What do the other guys look like?" he said to Eric quietly.

Eric leaned against the doorjamb and I stood just behind him. "They don't look so good either, Coach."

"Oh, Eric!" Carol said reproachfully. "Your face." She came over to him and touched it. He winced. "You need some ice."

"It'll be okay," he said gruffly, embarrassed.

"It won't be, not unless you get something on it." She went to the fridge and started breaking out ice cubes.

Tony took another sip of his coffee. "Who were they?"

"Perkins and Brokaw," Eric said.

"Was it over the upcoming game? Just tell me that."

Eric hung his head. "I don't know what it was about, Coach. It just happened."

"I have to know if it was about the game, Eric. If this is going to turn into a grudge match I have to know it." Tony's voice was low but urgent.

"Yeah, Coach, it was about the game. Some of it."

"What do you mean . . . some of it?"

Eric didn't answer. He took the ice pack from Carol and stood with it in his hands, looking at it.

Tony took another sip of coffee, and his cup clinked as he set it back in the saucer. "Get him a cup of coffee, will you, Carol? C'mon in here, Nicki."

I brushed past Eric and stepped into the kitchen. He raised his eyes slowly from his cup to look at me.

"You all right?"

"Yes, Tony."

"What was the fight about?"

"Like Eric said. They made remarks about the game and how they're going to beat us. And they made some remarks about Eric being out with me."

Eric shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

"What kind of remarks?" Tony asked.

"They teased him 'cause he was out with the coach's sister."

"They make any threats about fights at the game?"

"No, Tony."

He nodded slowly. "C'mon and have your coffee, Eric." Carol had set it on the table in the breakfast nook. "Why don't you run along to bed, hon," he said to her. "You're tired."

She looked at him hesitantly.

"It'll be okay," he assured her. "Go ahead."

I saw the look that passed between them before she left. Then I sat across from Eric at the breakfast nook and watched him put sugar in his coffee and drink it black. Tony was pacing slowly a few feet away from us. Then suddenly he stopped.

"I told you kids to save your anger for the game, didn't I?"

"Yeah, Coach."

"Why the hell did you think I didn't want you out tonight?"

Neither of us said anything.

"Damn it, one of you better answer me! Whose idea was it to go out?"

"Mine," Eric said. He looked at Tony. "Honest, Coach."

Tony sighed, then looked at me. He looked at me for a long moment. "You," he said, "seem to have entirely lost any conception you've had about the word 'obey.' If you don't start damn soon, to show me some better behavior I'm going to have to start to teach you some hard lessons. You know that?"

I just looked at the table.

"I'm disappointed as hell in both of you. Eric, you've broken curfew and you took my sister out to a brawl. Now damn it, am I going to have to stop you two from going out? Is that what I'm going to have to do?"

I looked at Eric across the table, and our eyes flashed the same thought to each other.

If Tony ever needed any reason to stop us from going out together, this was the time, the perfect excuse.

"I'm sorry, Coach," Eric said. It won't happen again. I promise. I'd like to keep seeing Nicki. If it's all right with you."

His politeness threw Tony off guard. The anger went out of him. He looked from one of us to the other, then his eyes lingered on me. "Go to bed," he said. "First chance I get, you and I are going to have a crash course on the word 'obedience.' Go on."

I got up. I went over to him. He was standing there, hands hooked onto the back pockets of his jeans. I stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

The eyelids stayed lowered, but one arm came around my waist, lightly. Then he moved away, his lips brushing my forehead. "Go on with you," he said.

When I left he was sitting down to have another cup of coffee with Eric.

CHAPTER

12

ON A CLEAR September day two weeks later, I was sitting in Mrs. Halsey's second-year Algebra class, actually feeling pretty good about things. The windows were open, and if I slid my eyes to the left I could see the field and Tony's car parked next to the red brick field house.

Admiral Halsey (that's what we called her) was droning on about things I could never hope to understand, even if Albert Einstein were up there explaining them to me.

"Nicki DeBonis, would you come to the front, please?"

I jerked myself awake. She was glaring at me, old Halsey. She'd just been buzzed on her phone. Jeez, I got scared. She was always on me. If I did the slightest thing she'd grab Tony in the teachers' lounge and tell him. A year of Halsey. I got depressed just thinking about it.

I went up front. "You are wanted in the principal's office."

"What for?" I asked.

She looked at me. "I was not told. I assume that you know. Somebody sneaked into the principal's office yesterday and got hold of the P.A. system mike and announced that Friday was

sophomore skip day and no sophomore should come to school."

"It wasn't me."

"I wish you luck when you tell that to Mr. Weintraub. Your brother may be very popular in this school, young lady, because he is head coach and therefore able to get funds appropriated for his teams that other teachers can't get. But that does not give you any special privileges."

"I think you stink," I said.

"Very well, I shall tell him how you spoke to me."

I walked out. Jeez, I'd done it now. She'd trapped me into doing it. My heart was thumping and my palms were wet, going downstairs to Mr. Weintraub's office. Not once all last year did I ever have to go to the principal's office.

"You're to go right in, Nicki," Mrs. Eddington, Weintraub's secretary said to me. "Your brother's in there."

I was really scared now. And sure enough, there was Tony, in one of the leather chairs.

"Come on in, Nicki," Mr. Weintraub said. He was behind his desk. I stood, none too steadily, in front of his desk on the crimson rug, overwhelmed by the huge, dark furniture, the standing American and state flags, the plaques on the walls. My eyes slid to Tony. Something was wrong. Tony did not look so good.

Then I saw the other man in the office. He was young, and dressed in a suit and tie. He had a short haircut. "This is Detective Holzer from Juvenile," Mr. Weintraub said. "Detective, this is Nicki, the coach's sister."

The detective gave me a slight nod. My mouth went dry.

"Nicki," Tony's voice reached me. "Why don't you sit down?" I looked at him. He was saying things to me with his blue-grey eyes, and they were very sad, yet they calmed me. I sat.

"Nicki," Mr. Weintraub said. "Eric Scherer has been picked up for dealing in drugs. The detectives asked my permission to

search his locker this morning. They've been following him for about a month now."

Some people's words can make the world open up and swallow you. Mr. Weintraub's words did that to me. I was being swallowed by something after he said that because suddenly his voice was coming from very far away, and he was making no sense. Eric? My Eric? Drugs? He was still talking. I saw his lips moving, but I wasn't getting anything he said. I felt the blood drain from my face. My heart was pounding, my head spinning. It was like the room was upside down now. Mr. Weintraub finished speaking. I glanced from him to Tony, who was holding onto me with his eyes. Tony looked like he'd been hit by Air Force One.

". . . why we wanted to ask you a couple of questions," Weintraub was saying. "I'm sure you'll understand and cooperate."

"It *can't* be!" I blurted out. "It can't be, Mr. Weintraub. Eric wouldn't do something like that. Where is he? Why don't you ask him?"

"Calm down, Nicki." Tony's voice had a quiet authority in it. "Eric has been taken into custody. Captain Szabo has him over at Juvenile. And it is apparently true. They found the drugs in his locker."

"Somebody put them there," I said.

"No, Nicki," Tony corrected patiently. "Eric admitted to selling the drugs. So why don't you cooperate."

I felt the tears breaking through my restraint like water through a dam. I could see how Tony was taking this. Eric! Drugs! It made no sense at all! I felt sick inside. I looked again at Weintraub. I wanted to run out screaming. Not my Eric. I wanted to tell them how crazy they were. But Tony was here, validating it, calmly telling me it was true. I felt something collapse inside me. "What do you want to know?" I said.

Weintraub leaned forward. "Did Eric ever speak to you about any money dealings? About having to meet anybody

whose name you didn't recognize? About having to be at the Seven Eleven at a certain hour?"

"You should be asking Eric these things," I said.

"Nicki," Tony said sharply, "we're trying to *help* Eric. He won't give us the name of the person he was selling for. Eric is small potatoes in this. The police want the pusher."

I shook my head. "No, I never heard anything at all out of Eric about any of this."

"Did he ever offer you anything?" Weintraub asked.

I looked at him, horrified. "What kind of a question is that?"

Tony got up suddenly then. He didn't say anything, but he walked to the window and stood looking out, his back to us.

"It's a darned good one, I think," Weintraub said. "And I'd like a straight answer, young lady. I'm the principal of this school and I realize Scherer is our star running back. I realize how much he means to the team. And to your brother who put so much work into him. But I will not tolerate drugs in this school! Your brother respects that. I expect you to also!"

Tony was gazing silently out the window. With my eyes, I traced the white letters that said COACH on the back of his jacket. Then he turned from the window. "Ed," he said, "can I? Do you mind?"

"Of course not," Weintraub said, glaring at me. "I wish you would. You apparently know how to handle her."

Tony sat on the windowseat, framed by the red velvet drapes, the afternoon sun bringing out the highlights in his hair. "Nick," he said solemnly, "everybody in this school has been offered drugs at one time or another. We . . ." he took a deep breath and let it out, "we've talked about this. Now I know how you feel about Eric. We're not asking you to rat on him. We're asking you for anything that might lead to apprehending the pusher, who's obviously got a few of our kids working for him. Cooperate now, and I'll do my best to help Eric."

His blue eyes were swimming with something. I did not

know what. But I knew one thing then. If Tony was going down I'd do my best to help him. "No," I said. "He never offered me anything. I don't know anything, honest."

"That's good enough for me, Ed," Tony said.

Weintraub nodded and looked at the detective.

"Did this boyfriend of yours have any money, Miss DeBonis?" The voice was lifeless.

"Yes. But he works for it."

"Where?"

"He works for my brother. He does odd jobs. It isn't much, and he has to put gas in his car and everything."

"He take you out much?"

I ran my tongue along my lips, which seemed parched. "We went out sometimes."

"Where?"

"To the movies. On Friday night you can get into the Rivoli for a dollar each. If it isn't R-rated. My brother won't let me go if it's R-rated."

He nodded. "Where else?"

"To Carielo's for pizza. Or Fhrome's for ice cream."

"Did he ever mention needing money to fix the car?"

"He needed new points." My voice was down to a whisper. "But he was going to ask the shop class in school to do it."

"Okay, that's about it." The detective stepped forward and shook hands with Weintraub and Tony. Then he left. I sat there shaking, feeling dirty because I'd had to talk about Eric like that. My hands and feet were cold. My face was hot.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Nicki," Mr. Weintraub said.

I wouldn't look at him. Tony came over, and I felt his hand on my shoulder. "Nick, Mr. Weintraub is speaking to you."

"Yes, sir," I said mechanically.

"Go back and get your things." Tony checked his watch. "Last period will be over any minute. Go right home after school, will you? I'd rather you didn't discuss this with anybody."

CHAPTER

13

IT WAS AFTER six when Tony got home that night. Carol and I were in the kitchen, just sitting down to a warmed-over supper, when his car pulled in the drive. We sat listening as he came in the front door, as his footsteps went down the center hall to his study, as the door closed.

Carol looked across the table at me and sighed. "He called off practice. He's been at police headquarters all afternoon. I'm going to talk to him. You sit here and eat."

She took a glass of iced tea off the table to bring to him, and I sat there pushing my food around on my plate until she came back. Her dinner was cold by now, but she seemed not to care. "He doesn't want to eat now," she said. "Eric's coming any minute."

"Eric?"

"Stay out of it, Nick. Take my advice. Now eat supper."

Just as she said that, Eric's car pulled in. I got up, like a shot, and flew out of the kitchen.

"Nicki!" her voice crackled after me.

I flew down the center hall and stopped as he came in the door. "Eric, did you do what they said you did?"

His face seemed even thinner with anguish. "Yeah."

I bit my bottom lip, my eyes wide with disbelief. "Why, Eric?"

He shrugged and looked at the floor. "Aw, gee, Nick, how the hell do I know? I've been all mixed up, and they made it sound so easy."

"What were you selling?"

"Bennies. Uppers. Downers."

I started to cry then. I put both hands over my mouth and started to shake.

"Hey, Nick," and Eric came towards me. He put his hands on my shoulders. "Oh God, Nick, don't, please. I. . . ."

A door opened behind us down the hall. "Leave her alone and get in here." My brother's voice, level and like ice.

"Sure, Coach," Eric said. And he moved immediately, like he was on the end of a fishing line and Tony was reeling him in. Tony stood there holding the door of his study, and Eric went in. Tony was about to follow but I flew down the hall and threw my arms around his middle. He closed the door, and his hand went around my shoulder. "Go eat dinner, Nick."

"Tony, please." I hugged him tight. I clung to him like I used to when I was a little kid and I wanted something really bad. He rested his chin on top of my head. "What did you do to Halsey today?" he asked gently.

I looked up at him. "What?"

There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "I heard about what you said to her."

I stepped back and wiped my face with my hand. "Yeah, well she deserved it. She says stuff to me about you all the time."

He nodded. "You're gonna have to apologize to her tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because, Nick. I don't need any more trouble. Now will you do that for me? Will you apologize?"

I nodded. "Tony, what are you going to do to Eric?"

"Have him for supper. You think I want cold chicken?" He turned and opened the door. "Go have dinner, Nick. Do as you're told."

"Who in hell do you think you've been conning! Just who!"

The door had barely closed. I stood outside trembling.

"Coach," I heard Eric say, "If you'll just. . . ."

"Shut up! When I give you permission to speak, you'll speak, and not before! And when you speak you'd better have the right answers, mister, or it's over between us. *Finished!* Now sit down in that chair, and don't open your mouth until I tell you to!"

I leaned my forehead against the pattern on the colonial wallpaper above the chair rail in the hall. There was silence for a moment, then Tony's voice again, lower now. He does that when he gets mad, yells one minute and drops his voice to a whisper the next. I heard Eric's voice again. Then Tony.

"I've done everything for you that I possibly can! There was a crack. Tony's hand coming down on the desk.

"Nicki!" Carol was behind me. "Come back this instant and stop listening! Come on! Nicki, get back in here or I'll tell your brother you've been giving me a hard time. Then you'll be sorry!"

I went back into the kitchen with her and tried to finish my supper. I could see she was upset; her face was drawn. All this wasn't doing her any good. And I didn't want to upset her. Jeez, Tony would kill me for that.

We ate in silence, but every so often the sound of Tony's voice, raised in anger, would drift down the hall. Then there was a crash, like somebody had thrown something. I looked at Carol. "Tony hit him," I said.

"Tony wouldn't do that."

"Yes, he would."

She was pushing her food around on her plate. "There isn't

anybody else to straighten him out, Nick. This afternoon at the police station, his mother asked Captain Szabo to put him in Tony's custody."

I stared at her. "What?"

She was looking at her plate. "Tony agreed. Why do you think he's here now?"

"But he can't do that, Carol."

She looked at me. "Why can't he? Who's more qualified?"

"But it would be the *worst* thing! Don't you see. . . ." I stopped myself. But she caught on. She stirred her coffee slowly.

"Have you been listening to rumors, Nicki? About your own brother?"

So Carol knew. I had wondered if talk had gotten to her.

"Does Tony know you've been listening to rumors? That you believe them?"

The tears came to my eyes. "No."

"Shame on you," she said. "Don't 'no' me. I can see you've had doubts. What would Tony say if he knew? What about Eric?"

I looked at my plate.

"Oh my God," she said. "No wonder that poor kid is so mixed up. All this time. And you and he going together. Why didn't you say something to Tony?"

"I couldn't." I said. "Please, Carol, I just couldn't."

"Well," she said, "at any rate Eric will have to have a hearing. They'll decide in court if he needs rehabilitation. And the Child Study Team at school will meet with him. I'll do my best for him on the Child Study Team, Nick. Eric has a lot of good things going for him. Now I want you to go upstairs and do your homework, and not come down while Tony's eating."

I moved away from the table. "Carol," I said, "didn't you ever believe the rumors? Not ever?"

She looked at me. "Tony's a popular figure in town, Nick. It goes with the territory."

* * *

Later, after Eric left, after Tony had had supper and the house got quiet and the September dusk closed in, I crept downstairs. I had showered and was in my pajamas. Lamps were on all over the house now. I peeked in the living room and saw Carol, curled up with a book, studying. I went to the front door and peered out the screen. Tony was on the porch swing. I went out onto the porch. Lamplight from houses up and down the block spilled out into the night. "Tony?"

"Yeah." A striped canvas pillow was under his head, another under his feet. His shoes were off.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at the stars."

I sat down on the round hemp rug next to him. "You shouldn't be out here like that, Nick. You're half-dressed."

"Tony, it was neat of you to have Eric put in your custody."

"Yeah. It was terrific of me, wasn't it."

"Tony, did you see Eric's mother at Juvenile today?"

"Yeah. I saw her."

"You went to school with her, didn't you?"

"Uh huh. I used to date her. When I was Eric's age. That isn't why I had him put in my custody, Nick, in case you were about to ask."

"I wasn't asking."

"Yes you were."

"Then why did you?"

"I just don't want to lose my star running back."

"Not because you care about Eric?"

" 'Course I care. I care about all these damned kids. And I end up getting a kick in the pants for it. Someday I'll wise up."

"Did Eric tell you why he did it, Tony? Why he was dealing?"

"I don't know anything right now, Nick. I only know one thing. The world usually blows up in my face once a day. Once a day I can handle. Today it blew up twice."

I felt bad when he said that. "Eric will make it up to you, Tony."

"He'd better."

"Not only when he plays. Otherwise."

"He won't be playing for a while."

I tried to control my voice. "Isn't Mr. Weintraub going to let him stay on the team?"

"It isn't Weintraub's decision. It's mine."

"Are you going to let him back on the team?"

"When I'm ready."

"When will that be?"

"He has to have his hearing first. A couple of weeks."

"But he'll miss the first game!"

"He'll miss more than the first game. Playing football is a privilege, Nick. He's going to have to get his act together before I let him back."

"But the only way he can get into *college* is with a football scholarship!"

"Well then," his voice floated in the dark, "he should have thought of that before, maybe, before he went around playing his smart-ass kid games and violating people's trust in him, don't you think?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't trust my voice. I made a move to leave, but his hand reached out and grabbed my hair in back and pulled me towards him. I leaned my head on his chest. "That's the way *you* got to college. On a football scholarship," I said tearfully.

"I could have gone on the old man's money."

"But you didn't. You were too proud. So you needed football. So you know how it is."

"Yeah, I know how it is." He kissed the top of my head. "I know what I'm doing, Nick. Believe me, I don't get my kicks out of ruining people's lives. Your precious Eric will be okay when I'm done with him. Just trust me. I promise, I know what I'm doing."

CHAPTER

14

LARRY TOLD me once that the most remarkable thing about human beings is their ability to accept changes of circumstances and fate. Their ability to adjust to almost anything. That is also the most frightening thing about humans, he told me. He says that's what really makes nightmares, the fact that we accept things, sometimes horrendous things, without saying, "okay, enough."

Eric was arrested on a Thursday and the whole following week he wasn't in school, and we played our first game without him and it was like a nightmare—and yet here I was, going through the motions, accepting it all. We all accepted it and went on. Tony, who needed Eric so bad, Eric, and me.

The game went on as if nothing had happened. Runnymede won, but the only reason was because Oak Ridge failed when they kicked for the extra point. Tony is not happy with a win that close. He considered it no win at all.

I only got two pictures during the game. I left at half-time. I knew it was wrong when I had a job to do, but something happened and I didn't want to go back.

At half-time I took a walk and spotted Carol and Coach Hed-

den's wife in the stands. Carol had forgotten her thermos of coffee, so she called to me to get her a cup. And I met Eric at the refreshment stand.

I turned and he was there behind me, looking forlorn in his zip-up sweatshirt. We got jostled around a lot, with people handing coffee and hot dogs over our heads. I wanted to cry, seeing him again. I hadn't seen him since the night of his arrest because Tony had put a moritorium on us dating. Or even seeing each other, until the hearing. Eric gave me his best lopsided grin. "Guess what?"

"Tony's gonna let you back on the team."

"No. Not yet. I gotta go to Rahway State Prison with him. To the Lifers' Program."

Somebody passed a hot dog in front of me and the smell made me sick. I knew about the Lifers' Program. Police and others who work with young people take boys who get in trouble into the prison so the cons can talk to them. Because he works so closely with Captain Szabo of Juvenile, Tony has gone along a couple of times.

"That stinks," I said. "I've heard Tony talk about it. They make you stand there and they insult you. You don't deserve that, Eric!"

He took my arm, leading me through the crowd. "Kids who got caught doing a lot less than I have have gone through. Look, do you have a couple of minutes? We can talk in my car."

"I have all night. I don't feel like going back on the field. Eric, this is ridiculous. Tony's going too far!"

"It isn't Tony's suggestion. A teacher or parent can't refer a kid. It has to be a judge or police official. Captain Szabo suggested it because he figured it would be a plus when I have my hearing. Look, Coach is going *with* me, Nick. He's taking a day off to go."

We went to his car. We listened to the game and talked. I was just so mad at Tony I didn't care if he found out or not.

* * *

He found out. Saturday morning at breakfast he looked across the table at me. "Were you with Eric last night?"

"Yes."

"You were supposed to be on the field until the game was over. You missed the touchdown. Eric didn't make it, of course, which is probably why you didn't care."

"It was a dumb game," I said. "We played rotten. If you'd had Eric you'd have scored at least two more touchdowns."

I saw the anger suffuse his face. "You're grounded for a week for disobeying me and running off on your responsibilities," he said quietly. "A few other kids wanted that job of photographer. That happens once more and I'll have McCloud fire you."

McCloud was the yearbook advisor. I looked at him. "Does that mean I can't go to after-school practices too?"

"That means everything. You know what it means." He looked at Carol. "Do you have something to say?"

"Not to you. Not this morning." She got up to get more milk from the fridge. She looked pale. I think she was throwing up mornings now. But in her brushed-nylon kimono she looked young and pretty.

"He told me you're making him go through the Lifers' Program," I said. "I was sore at you for making him go."

"Excellent reason for letting your personal reasons get in the way of your responsibilities. Well, you can think about it for a week while you miss practice."

"I don't care about your old practice."

"Apparently you don't."

"Eric isn't started on a life of crime because he made one mistake."

"Look," he pointed a finger at me, "when I want your advice I'll ask for it."

"Tony." Carol sat down. "Nicki! For heaven's sake, you two stop arguing! Tony, I'm not sticking up for Nicki, but that program is for inner-city kids who are really hard-core."

"That program is for any kid who's referred to it. I've been

through it twice. It won't kill him. And I don't want to hear any more from either of you. You . . ." he looked at me, . . . "you have enough of your own business to mind. You have commitments to honor. When are you going to finish the job with the books in Larry's office?"

"Next Saturday."

"Why not today? You've put it off too long. Is there a reason?"

"No." But there was. I did not trust myself in Larry's office. Meredith was still bugging me for the pills. She'd been on me every day in school this week.

" . . . want you there this afternoon," Tony was saying. "No more excuses. Try to finish something you start for a change."

Carol sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, hon," he said. "I don't mean to upset you."

They had argued last night. I'd stood upstairs in the hall listening. She'd told him that she was sick of his moods.

"You're killing yourself more than Eric," she'd said. "You're blowing this way out of proportion. I know how much you have invested in him, that you see yourself all over in him, Tony. But he made one mistake. You're taking it personally."

"I'm his coach, dammit," he'd said. "I have a right to take it personally. I need him on the team. The game tonight was a disaster. He betrayed my trust, Carol."

"What did I do," she asked, "when I lost our first baby because I was drinking?"

I didn't hear his reply. But I knew then why Larry always said Carol was good for Tony. With all his toughness, Tony was an idealist, Larry said. Carol's father had been a drinker and that had cured her of idealism. She'd seen her mother done in by her husband's drinking. Growing up, Carol had gotten no moral support. Her mother had just about managed to raise her and send her off to college, where she'd met Tony.

"Eric's a good kid," she'd told Tony last night. "Polite,

good student. The Child Study Team will take that into consideration."

"The eggheads on the Child Study Team can't do half for him what those guys at Rahway can do," he'd insisted.

"I'm one of those eggheads," she'd thrown at him, "and I think I could try. And if you're not too proud to take an egghead's advice, let me tell you, those kids have heard the rumors about you being Eric's father."

Silence. I'd held my breath on the landing. "You sure?"

"I got it out of Nicki."

Silence again. "My God! What did she say?"

"I don't think she believes it. But she's confused because I think Eric does."

"Jesus *Christ*! Why didn't you tell me, Carol!"

"I'm telling you. Don't be so hard on Eric, Tony. He's had that on him, too. It must be awful for them, going together."

"Yeah, well it didn't seem to curtail their activities tonight. They spent the second half in Eric's car. For which I am going to kick ass tomorrow. Thanks, though, Carol. Nicki's been saying things and I should have picked up on them, but I didn't. Guess I didn't want to."

She'd come up to bed right after that but he hadn't. And when I came out of the shower later I saw the light still on in the living room.

He covered her hand on the table now. "Love me?"

" 'Course I do," she said. "You just make me madder than hell sometimes, that's all."

If I weren't so miserable I'd be enjoying all this. But now I was grounded. Eric had to go through the Lifers' Program, and this afternoon I had to go to Larry's office and steal some birth control pills for my friend. I wanted out of the nightmare now if I could, please. At least I knew enough to ask.

CHAPTER

15

I SAT ON the floor in Larry's office, my knees drawn up, my head buried in them. On the floor all around me were the impossible books.

A man with sores all over the backs of his hands had come in about fifteen minutes ago. Ruderman told me he'd been exposed to something called Agent Orange in Vietnam. I knew about Agent Orange, the chemical this country had used in Vietnam, because Tony had been a captain in the army there. He'd been trapped in the jungle with his men. He'd fought hand-to-hand combat to get out, and he'd come out with shrapnel in him. And stab wounds. One of his hands has a damaged nerve in it. He'd come home a hero with all kinds of medals.

It was depressing, seeing the man with the bad hands. And I started thinking . . . suppose Tony had something like that show up in him now, seven years later?

Ruderman was the only nurse on this Saturday, and she was down the hall with Larry. I knew that if I was going to do what I wanted to do I'd better do it now.

I got up and crept down the hall and into the lab area. The

red cabinets were where I'd seen the birth control pills. Inside were the pills in plastic packets, encased in cellophane. I reached and grabbed one, and a whole bunch came down at me. The cellophane packages were attached! Damn! I had about six of them altogether now.

"What are you doing there, young lady?"

Ruderman! Sneaking up on me in gum-soled shoes!

I had the packages scrunched in my hands behind me. "Nothing." I turned to face her. It sounded dumb. Boy, I know how dumb it sounded.

She stepped forward and held out her hand. "Give, c'mon, Nicki." The tone was forceful.

I was in trouble now, bad trouble. My heart was clawing inside me like a trapped animal.

"Give me what you have in your hand this minute!"

I stepped back, but in two strides she was at me, grabbing my arm and shaking me. "Take your hands off me!" I pulled free and ran over to the counter. I put the pills on it and leaned over them protectively. Bad move.

She came at me and whacked me on the rear end. Hard.

"Ow!" The pills went down on the floor. We stood there, both of us, like they were nitroglycerine. She bent down, wordlessly, and picked them up. And then her face went white.

"You know what these are?"

I sort of slid away from her, along the counter. "Uh huh."

"Nicki, *why*! What will your brother say?"

"You gonna tell him?"

"Tell him! I have to tell him! It's my job!" She shook her head in disbelief. Then she folded her arms across her middle. "Oh my God, this is going to kill him."

I stood there, saying nothing. I was sort of paralyzed, to tell you the truth. Scared silly. She sighed and looked at me. "I could kill you, you know that? What are you . . . not fifteen yet?"

I ran my tongue along my lips. "Ruderman," I said.

"Shut up!" She came at me then. She just sort of went crazy,

hitting me. "He *trusts* you!" And she lashed me on the shoulder. "He *loves* you!" And she hit me on the back. "And *this* is how you repay him! This!" And she took my pocketbook then, which was the size of a manila envelope and which I'd had slung over my shoulder, and hit me with it. On the rear end. "If you were my sister I'd beat you within an inch of your life!" I managed to break away from her finally, sobbing.

"You've got no right to hit me. I'm going to tell Larry!"

"I hope he gives it to you good. But he won't! He won't because he spoils you rotten. I'd give anything under God's sun not to have to tell him this." It sounded awful when she said that, and I really felt bad.

"Come along," she snapped.

I followed her meekly, wiping my face with my hand. We went down the hall to the receptionist's station. She brought me inside. "Sit."

I sat.

"Don't you dare move. Don't get up. You hear?"

Did I hear? Was she kidding?

"If you think for one minute that I'm enjoying this you're crazy. I've always thought you were a neat kid, and I've told your brother that. And now I'm going to have to go in there and tell him. . . ." She gestured down the hall, her voice trailing off.

"Ruderman, couldn't we just put them back and. . . ."

"Damn you, shut up, or I'll hit you again. Good this time!"

I shut up. She walked down the hall and the place got quiet. My heart was pounding inside me. I couldn't bear the fact that she was going to tell Larry. I didn't want to see my brother's face when he came out and looked at me. I knew I wouldn't be able to stand it.

In about five minutes, the man with the bad hands came out with Larry, followed by Ruderman. He was thanking Larry profusely. He went out the front door, and Larry went into his office. Ruderman followed him in.

A very long time went by. I was starting to feel sick inside. I

considered running out the front door, but that wouldn't do any good. I'd really be in for it then. My shoulder hurt. And my ear. To say nothing of where I was sitting.

Maybe it was only ten minutes that went by, I don't know. The lights on the switchboard lit up and then stopped. A few minutes after that Ruderman came out. She came back to where I was sitting and started moving papers around on the desk.

"Did you tell him?" I asked.

"Don't talk to me." She wouldn't look at me, just kept moving those papers around like her life depended on it. Jeez, I thought, she's practically crying.

I sat there wondering what was going on, but I was too scared to ask. Then, after about six eternities, the phone buzzed in front of her. She picked it up. "Yes," she murmured into it, "sure." She put it down. Still she didn't look at me. "He wants you," she said.

I slid off the seat and walked across the hall. At the door of Larry's office, I turned and looked back at her. She was still shuffling her stupid papers around. I stood outside Larry's door. My mouth was dry. I gripped the smooth handle. I leaned my forehead against the door and knocked.

"Yeah." The voice sounded very far away. "Come in."

CHAPTER

16

HE WAS slumped in the swivel chair. The pills were in his lap. I stood in front of his desk, afraid to sit, afraid to do anything. He just sat looking at me. When Larry looks at me I always realize how stupid other people's looks are, because he sees so much.

"Empty the pocketbook."

"What?"

"On the desk. Everything."

I stepped forward and did what he said. I put comb, mirror, house keys, Kleenex, wallet, and make-up bag on the desk. He took the pocketbook and turned it upside down, checked the zippered compartments. He looked into my wallet and make-up bag. "Pockets," he said.

"I don't have anything in my pockets."

"Come here where I can see and turn them out."

I went to stand in front of him. The jeans were tight and it was difficult, but I did it. The back ones were harder and I struggled, but I turned them out so he could see.

"Have you taken any of these before today?"

"No."

He drew in his breath, leaned back in the chair. "So what do I do now? Give you instructions on how to take them?"

He was talking about the pills and me. He thought I'd stolen them for myself! So did Ruderman. That's why she'd gone so crazy.

"They're not for me, Larry."

He took his hand down from his eyes and looked at me. "Are you going to lie to me, too, Nicki? I don't know what I'll do if you lie to me, I swear it." His voice sounded so sad.

"I'm not lying, Larry. What would I do with them? I'm not fooling around with anybody."

The brown eyes seemed almost black with emotion. "How do I know that, the way you've been cozying up to Eric?"

"Tony's not letting us date until Eric has his hearing."

"You disobeyed Tony on that. He told me. You saw Eric last night. You've been giving Tony a hell of a lot of trouble lately. He told me that too."

"Oh, Larry, how *could* they be for me!" My eyes misted up. "Even if you don't believe me, you know Eric and I would never. . . ." I almost lost my voice. "And you know *why*."

He compressed his mouth, considering that. Then he got up. "Put the stuff back in your pocketbook." He walked to the other end of the room, hands in the pockets of his white coat, pacing, thinking. He kept walking, in circles now. Then he stopped, facing sideways.

"You haven't resolved that with Tony yet, huh? You two?"

"No."

"Does he know you kids have suspicions?"

"I haven't. Eric has."

"You have, too, damn it," he snapped. "Don't deny it."

"Okay, I won't. I don't know what I think. I'm just trying to tell you. . . ."

"I know what you're trying to tell me. Okay. Okay then. The pills are not for you. I accept that. They're for somebody else then. Does that justify stealing them?"

I said nothing.

"Does it?"

"No."

"I don't know what to do with you anymore, Nicki. You know that? You're really on some kind of a trip this summer. I'm damned if I know what it is, though. And from what I hear, Tony doesn't either. What's the *matter* with you? I know you don't have a mother. If Mom were alive. . . ." He lost his voice saying that.

" . . . and the old man, when he was alive, he wasn't any good, leaving everything up to Tony like he did. But we tried with you, didn't we? Haven't we been the best of brothers?"

It was so poignant the way he said that. "Yes."

"Then *why*! How could you do this to us?"

"Larry, I haven't done anything. I only wanted one packet of pills. I couldn't get it ripped off from the others."

"One?" His voice cracked. "One," and he shook his head. "Don't you even know? Whoever you're taking them for has to take them regularly, you damn little fool!"

"Larry, don't talk to me like that."

"I'll talk to you however I please. The least I expect from you is brains. No wonder you stupid kids end up in trouble."

He'd never called me stupid before in my life. I started to cry. "I'm not stupid."

"Stop that damned crying. That's not gonna get you off. And if you have to throw up, you'll do it here. On the rug. Because that's not gonna get you off either."

I stopped crying. It got quiet. Our eyes met across the room. His voice got gentler. "Who are the pills for, Nicki?"

"I can't tell."

"What do you *mean*, you can't tell? I want a name! This is my office and I allowed you to roam freely in here. I trusted you. Do you know what that means? This place is full of pills. You want pills? Here. . . ."

In two strides, he was next to me. He grabbed my arm, opened the door, and pulled me into the hall. His grip was

bruising, but I stumbled along. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Ruderman come out of the receptionist's area.

"You want pills?" He let me go then and started opening cabinets in the lab area, taking samples out and throwing them on the counter. On the *floor*. "Here. Pills. All you want. It's a Goddamn candy store in here. And I trusted you!"

I'd never seen him like this in my life. His eyes were blazing, his face white, his hair was even mussed.

"Larry!"

"Shut up, Ruderman, stay out of this."

"I won't stay out of it. Calm yourself, Larry."

He calmed down somewhat. He leaned against the counter, running his hand through his hair. He took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, never taking his eyes from me. "Your Goddamn boyfriend's been picked up for dealing," he said. He lighted the cigarette. "Was he going to sell these, too?"

The thought had never occurred to me. I shook my head in disbelief, unable to speak.

"You have been nothing but trouble to me," Larry said softly now. "I don't know what to do with you anymore. But I'm going to give you one more chance. Give me a name, or we go to Tony. And if we go to Tony, if we walk out of here like this, you don't ever come back in here. You got that?"

"Larry!"

"Shut *up*, Ruderman. She's my sister and I'll handle it."

"You are not handling it. Do you know what you're saying? You're making decrees that you can never back down from!"

"Maybe I don't want to back down from them."

"Oh my God, you're impossible, you know that? You love this kid so much. A blind person could see it. And you're killing her. She's done something terrible, yes. And she needs a good spanking, maybe. But she doesn't need what you're doing to her."

"Thank you, Ruderman," he said tonelessly, "for the advice."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling, turned around, and left the room. He looked at me. "Well, what's it to be?" he said.

I pushed my hair from my face. All my life he'd been the tender, loving brother, the gentle one, always willing to listen and advise. Young and brilliant, but never too important to sweep me up in his strong arms, to take me places, to talk to me. He'd played a secondary role to Tony, of course, always deferring to Tony's authority. But always he'd been one of the most important people in my life. All that was over now. Inside, where things break, I felt something breaking.

For an instant I considered lying, telling him the pills were for me. But I couldn't do that. I had Eric to think about.

"I can't, Larry," I said.

He nodded. He checked his watch. "Is Tony home?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Okay." That was all. He walked past me, eyes averted. "Come along then."

CHAPTER

17

"CAN I SEE YOU?" Larry didn't even say hello, for crying out loud. Just went up to Tony, who was working with Eric on the side of the house, taking down the awnings. He just stood there, Larry did, in those chino pants he wears around the office, with the Oxford shirt and corduroy jacket. "Can I see you?" and the hands were plunged into the pants pockets, the tie askew.

"Sure." And I saw something click in Tony's glance, taking in Larry's tone, and me in the background, standing there like I was brain-damaged, not even saying hello to Eric. I could feel Eric looking at me from a short distance away. I knew he knew something was wrong. I couldn't look back.

It was cool inside the house. I adjusted my eyes to the dimness. "You want a beer?" Tony led the way to the living room.

"I just want to talk to you," Larry said.

Tony sat on the couch. "Sit down," he said. Larry did not sit down. He took the pills from his jacket pocket and set them on the coffee table. "You know what these are?"

Tony's expression didn't change. "Yes."

"Nicki's been stealing them from my office."

I could feel the vibes from across the room. I could feel Tony's pain and confusion. And I wished, standing there, that I could have died of leprosy or something before he ever had to have anybody tell him that about me.

He wiped his hand across his mouth. "You sure?"

"Would I say something like that about Nicki if I weren't sure? You think I like coming to you and telling you stuff like this?"

"No, I don't think that." Tony looked at me now. And I could feel him gathering all his resources. "Why don't you come here?" he said quietly.

I went over to him. I got halfway across the room anyway.

"Is this true?" he asked.

"Uh huh."

He nodded gravely, looking down at the pills. "Jesus, Nicki," he swore softly. "What in hell's going on with you?"

I looked at the floor. From half-raised eyelids I saw Tony shake his head. "You've really been doing a number on me lately, Nick," he said. "You know that?"

"I told you," Larry said, "that she's been running wild. I told you a few times this summer. You're so damned strict with her, and right under your nose she does stuff like this."

"Under your nose, too, Larry."

"Okay. Granted. But I also told you, over a year ago, to do something about getting sex education in that damned school. Maybe if you'd listened to me this wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, shut up about sex education, Larry. Nicki's had all the sex education she needs. From you. Since she was ten. And sit down, will you please?"

Larry just looked at him, startled. He started to say something, then stopped. He sat down. Again Tony looked at me. "Get the hell over here."

I went over to him.

He squinted up at me. "What's the deal? Why are you taking this stuff? Are they for you?"

I shook my head, no.

He considered that for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "Well, what I want is for you to sit down here next to me and tell me that again. I wanna hear it again, Nick."

I could feel Larry's eyes boring into me as I sat down. And then all of a sudden there wasn't anybody else in the room but me and Tony. There wasn't anybody else in the *world*. He just sort of hunched forward next to me on the couch and, with his arm encircling me, made a world that nobody could enter.

"I wanna hear it again, Nick."

"They're not for me."

He just kept looking at me, taking in all of me, my face, my soul. "One more time," he said. "They're not for me, Tony. Say it."

"They're not for me, Tony."

"Who are they for then?"

But I couldn't take that next step with him.

"Nick." He had his hand on my elbow and it tightened.

"I can't."

"What do you *mean*, you can't?" He got up. He walked a few feet away, turned, and stood looking at me, kind of in the type of stance he used on the football field, feet spread, hands low on his hips. "I don't wanna hear 'can't,' Nick. I want a name. *Now*." The voice was low.

"I can't tell on my friends." I looked at him beseechingly.

"The hell with your friends. They aren't friends if they ask you to steal for them."

"Tony. . . ."

"*Don't* give me that bull. If you should worry about anybody's feelings, it's Larry's. He's the best damned friend you've got. He always has been. And you stole from him."

I started to cry.

"No tears." He stood over me now. "You wanna cry, we'll go upstairs, you and me. I'll give you something to cry about."

"Tony," Larry said, "Let's keep our heads."

Their eyes met. They glared at each other. "I don't think," Tony said evenly, "that anyone has ever had to worry about how I handle Nicki. Not even you."

Larry didn't know what to say then. His face flushed.

"Now, do you want me to handle this?" Tony asked. "Or don't you?"

"Of course. I'm sorry I questioned your handling of Nicki. It's always been above reproach." But Larry was hurt, you could see. He came and scooped the pills off the coffee table. "I'll be outside."

Tony stood watching him go. "Jesus," he said. "Damn, I don't want to argue with him. He's so damned decent." He looked at me. "Taking the pills was plain dumb. But what you've done to him is unforgivable. You had something rare with him, and you blew it."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"I'm telling you! You trample on everybody who loves you. You always did. Ever since you were a little kid."

I didn't say anything to that. He was right. He walked across the room then to view me from a distance, as if he could see something he liked that way that he couldn't see close up.

"Eric's hearing comes up in a week. I'm going to testify in his behalf. If you don't tell me who the pills are for, I have to assume they're for you. That places a hell of a burden on Eric."

"It's not the only burden he's got," I said. I looked at him fully, saying it. I don't know where I got the courage to say it, I swear it.

He got what I meant. And only for a moment did he look shocked, then he walked to the window and looked out. It was very quiet in the house. The grandfather clock chimed the hour in the hall. He waited until it finished, then he turned to me. "I guess I can't ask for trust unless I give it. Is that what you're trying to tell me?" The voice was hushed now, the anger deflated.

I looked at him mutely, more scared now than before.

"I've been meaning to settle this with you," he said

carefully, "but it hasn't been easy to bring up. I know about the rumors, Nicki. And I am not Eric's father. I wouldn't allow him near you if I were." He looked at me.

I nodded silently. My eyes were wide in apprehension.

"I wish I were." And he turned away, continuing quietly as he looked out the window again. "I was going with his mother in my senior year. The old man had come back from Europe after being away three years, and Mom was pregnant with you. I was confused and angry at him. I needed somebody. Eric's mother and I were . . . very close for a while, and it was sweet and beautiful. But she wanted marriage after high school, and I was headed for college." He looked at me. "I never led her on to believe I would marry her. She knew I had to go to college. We broke up, and she married his father on the rebound, the guy she's divorced from now. Okay?"

I nodded silently.

He smiled sadly. "I'm sorry I didn't clear this up before. I don't like suspicions and half-truths between us, Nicki. Do you think you want to give me that name now?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Let's go outside and find Larry."

18

"DO YOU KNOW what peer pressure is, Nicki?"

I'd been in Larry's office only two minutes when I knew, with all the terror of real knowledge, that he was going to be rotten to me. And I realized suddenly that I didn't know how to defend myself against Larry. I had never had to.

His mood was subdued, careful and, like his face, white around the edges. He'd had Meredith in here an hour before he called me in. Tony had brought us both over this morning. He and Larry had put their heads together and decided that whatever was to be "done" about me Larry was to do.

I have to tell you that Meredith didn't look so hot when she came out. She was out of it, you could tell. Larry had put her in a cab, and she never even looked at me when she left.

"Look at me," he said to me now. I was slumped in a chair. I raised my eyes.

"Sit *up*, for heaven's sakes. It'll save time all around if you stop acting like six, and at least act like twelve. And why do you wear jeans on Sunday morning?"

"I didn't know this was formal."

He absorbed that silently. "Don't you go to church?"

"Larry, you know I don't!" I was furious with him for all this posturing. He was doing bad things to himself, and I hated to see him like this.

"Why not? How do Tony and Carol let you get away with that? I know Tony doesn't go, but Carol does sometimes, doesn't she?"

I shrugged. "I go with her sometimes. It's no big deal. You know Tony won't make me go because *he* doesn't. And he says that would be hypocritical."

He nodded. "Tony's done all right by you. All this is my fault. I've spoiled you. I've made a plaything out of you. You never really felt you had to toe the line with me. Sit *up*, will you please? Can you at least do that when I tell you?"

I put my hand over my eyes. "Oh God, Larry, do you know what you sound like?"

He got up then. Abruptly, he pushed back his chair and came around to cross the space between us. He stood over me, his face very white. "What do I sound like?"

I sat up. I looked up into his brown eyes to see the blackness of very real anger. And nothing, nothing there whatsoever, left for me.

"Like Tony," I said in a small voice.

"Good. Then you'll listen to me, won't you?"

"Yes."

"Fine." And he went back and sat down. The whole thing took half a minute and was crazy. I could hardly believe it happened.

"You're very subject to peer pressure. We're going to have to do something about that, Nicki."

It sounded like he'd just taken x-rays of my soul and was holding them up to the light to show me the shadows.

"I've made an appointment for Meredith with a clinic for more counseling, and so she can get her pills. I don't approve, but it isn't for me to approve. With you it isn't so simple."

He paused, examined his pencil. "Somebody's got to take you in hand, the way things have been going, Nicki. Tony and I

have discussed it. What I have planned for you is very positive. I've made an appointment for you to see a very nice woman at the hospital who's in charge of volunteers. Her name is Mrs. Hilary. You're to go Monday after school and see her to fill out the necessary papers to be a candy-striper."

I just stared at him. I couldn't believe what he was saying.

"I figure you ought to be able to give at least two afternoons a week, and Saturdays, without it interfering with your studies. You'll have to buy your own uniform. Come to me and I'll give you money for that."

I was still staring. Was he crazy? I started to speak, but I couldn't.

"What is it, Nicki?" he asked solicitously.

"You can't . . . do that to me!"

"What am I doing to you?"

I reached wildly for words. "I *hate* hospitals. They make me sick. I won't do it, Larry. You can't make me."

"You don't want to pursue that trend of thought, do you, Nicki? What I can or can't do as far as you're concerned? You know better, surely."

I closed my eyes, swimming behind the lids. Drowning. I hated him more at this moment than I ever thought I could. I hated his ease of tone and manner. "Does Tony know about this?"

"Of course," he smiled at me. "Tony approves wholeheartedly."

"I'm the photographer for the football team for the yearbook, you know. I have to be at the games Saturdays. Tony knows that."

He looked at me. "You've been giving Tony lots of hell lately. He knows that, too."

He had me there, okay. "I think you stink."

The smile faded. "You have demons inside you, Nicki," he said sadly.

"I have not."

"Yes, you do. I know what they're like because I have them

too. Do you want me to take them out and parade them across the room?''

It stung when he said that. Because he knew me so well and because he would do it. He would name my sins if I pushed him.

''You can think what you want of me,'' he said. ''I know part of the problem with me is that I always wanted the adoration of my little sister. If I lose it now, I lose it. But you're going to do this. I don't care how you dislike me for it.''

It was all slipping away from me now. There was nothing more left in him for me to appeal to. ''Larry,'' I whispered, ''please don't do this to me. I'm sorry for what I did, and I'll be good for you. I'll listen to you just like I listen to Tony. I don't *wanna* work at the hospital. I'll do anything else you want! Anything!''

That upset him more than anything. He got up and threw the pencil down on the desk. ''Stop it! Don't beg, damn it! You've got better stuff in you than that. And don't *ever* say that to anybody! That you'll do anything they want! Not even to me!''

I wiped my eyes and stopped crying. I could see he was trying to compose himself. ''Go down the hall and wash your face so I can take you home,'' he said gently. ''Go ahead now. Do as you're told.''

I got up and moved towards the door, my eyes glued on him. ''You're doing bad things to yourself,'' I said. ''I hope you know that.''

''I know it, Nicki.''

''If you do this to me I'll probably never speak to you again.''

''You will. When you grow up.''

''That'll be a long time.''

''I'll wait,'' he said. Still he wouldn't look at me. And his voice, when he said it, was unsteady and very raspy.

He took me home.

We went out into the bright September sunlight. The tree-

shaded street was empty. From down the street, the bells of the First Presbyterian Church were ringing. Church bells wipe me out. They absolutely do me in. They are on a par, in my mind, with seeing-eye dogs and wild geese in formation. I stood there listening to the bells while he opened his car.

He finally got his new car. It is silver-grey, with a vinyl roof. The inside is deep blue and soft, and he doesn't know where all the dials are on the dash yet.

He should have a new car, I thought. He should have a new face, the way he's been acting.

Inside, you couldn't hear the church bells anymore because it was all hermetically sealed. He pushed the cigarette lighter in. I felt very zonked out, to tell you the truth, like I was suffocating under something too heavy on my chest. Yet I noticed everything in detail. I'm that way. I can be zonked out completely, and yet my mind continues to take in everything that goes on around me.

Anyway, he didn't look so good either. He was awfully tense. I noticed his face when he lit the cigarette. I don't want you to think I was looking at him, though. I was just sitting still with my hands in my lap, and I sort of slid my eyes over.

He backed down the driveway, and I started wondering what he'd done with the old car. He'd promised me once that when I was old enough he'd get me a little car all my own. But who cared anymore? He could keep his stupid car.

He'd always given me things, though. I leaned back in the plush seat, remembering the skis he'd given me one Christmas. And the television set another time. And my own phone. All that had been in the last few years. But that was all over now. I wasn't a little kid anymore.

"Are Tony and Carol home?" He was talking to me. Did he think I would answer? Had he lost some brain cells? I looked out the window.

"You are very immature, Nicki," he said quietly. "Do you know that? I suppose it has something to do with the fact that we've all spoiled you so."

I could see I was getting to him, not talking. Men can't stand it when you don't talk to them. He might think I was immature, but I know that much. But the tears came to my eyes anyway when he said that.

I'm going to have to get over that, I decided. All my life, I cared what he thought of me. I was going to have to develop new thought patterns. I would work on them.

We pulled up in front of Tony's house. "I'm on my way to Philadelphia or I'd come in," he said, like I cared. He cut the ignition. I reached for the door handle but I couldn't find it. All these stupid new cars have the door handles hidden so you have to be a rocket scientist to find them. He reached across me and flipped the handle, and I moved, but in an instant his arm was across me and he had his hand on the handle.

"Tomorrow your appointment with Mrs. Hilary is at three. Be on time."

"Let me go."

"I'll be in the doctors' lounge around four-thirty. Bring the papers there so I can sign them." The sad brown eyes, the eyes I'd sought refuge in since I was old enough to know what refuge was, were looking at me. I felt trapped.

"Nicki," Larry said. But I wouldn't look at him.

"Look," and all of a sudden he tightened his grip on the door handle, pinning me back against the seat. "Do you think it's easy being a parent? Do you think I like any of this?"

"I think you do."

"Then you think damn little. You know damn little."

"Fine." My voice was tight. "I'm stupid."

He just looked at me. I wished he would stop looking at me. Then he released the door handle. "Get out," he said. "Get the hell out."

I got out. Tony was coming across the lawn now. I stumbled past him into the house.

CHAPTER

19

"WHY DON'T YOU come downstairs and have some brunch with us? We're going for a ride after. Carol wants to get some mums for the front of the house."

"He's taken away my football games and I hate him for it. I'm going to have to give up being team photographer, too."

Tony came into the room, treading lightly. "You're gonna live," he said gently. He was eyeing me carefully. I could see that from where I was plopped in the middle of my bed.

I glared at him. "You and him cooked it up. The two of you."

He sat down in the chintz-covered chair next to my bed and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "You've been asking for it, Nick. I've been warning you, haven't I?"

"I could have done the stupid volunteering after school. I'm never speaking to him again, I swear, Tony."

"His intentions are sincere and as straight as anything, Nick. He's trying to set you in some kind of direction."

"He can go to hell before I speak to him again."

"If it makes you feel better to say it, then say it. But don't do it, Nick."

"I won't be able to do the dumb job anyway."

"Now which is it, Nick? Loss of the football games, fear of doing the job, or the idea that your darling brother came down on you for the first time in your life?"

"You can go to hell too."

He didn't like that. A shadow crossed his face. Normally, he wouldn't take that from me, but now he just looked at me sadly. "Do you know what he said to me when I asked him to be your guardian after the old man died? He said, 'No, because I won't be able to be her friend anymore.' He worried about that, Nick."

"He really acts like he's worried about that."

"You wanted him to be the adoring brother, and you wanted to be able to put the screws to him at the same time. What did you expect, huh?"

"I didn't expect him to go crazy. You don't know it, Tony, but he's gone out of his way to be rotten to me. And I don't love him anymore."

He didn't say anything for a moment. He shifted his weight in the chair. "When you were born . . . " he said.

"Oh, God, please don't start *that*, Tony."

He frowned. "I am starting it, and I expect you to listen."

There was no stopping him. I would have to listen.

"You were two months old," he recited quietly, "very small and perfect, with doll's arms and a little bow of a mouth and a cap of dark hair. Just looking at you made a person feel someone else was running things, and we were all foolish to worry about anything at all. I was home from college for Thanksgiving and I was to be your godfather. When Larry found out, he barely spoke to me. It took me damned near a week to figure out why. I finally figured it out when I was holding you in church. There was Larry, glaring over at me with the only real malice I've ever seen in him in my life."

"He can stuff it in his ear."

He looked at me carefully. "He was very close to Mom.

There's something you should know that I've never told you. She died in his arms, d'ya know that?"

I looked up at him. It had registered, and it had not registered. I blinked. "What?"

"I don't ever want you to let him know I told you this. I'd been called home from college because she was very bad. We were allowed in to see her. The three of us went, the old man, Larry, and I. We were in the room and she took a real bad turn for the worse. The old man and I went down the hall to get the doctor. We came back in a few minutes and she was sitting up, sort of. In Larry's arms. He held her. She died that way. In his arms."

I felt a roaring behind my ears. My lips were dry. I said nothing. I just looked at him.

"Right after that, he started talking about studying to be a doctor. And every time he delivers a baby he does it for her. You should know that, too."

He got up and started for the door. "I'm going to forget everything you've said in here because you're upset. But I don't want to hear it again. Don't mess with the bonds that tie us together, Nicki. They're deep and mysterious and have dark undersides that shouldn't be messed with. Work it out somehow inside yourself. I won't have you and Larry not getting along. I won't have you bringing your wrath down upon this family like a wrecking ball either. Do you hear?"

I heard. "Yes," I said. I could barely speak.

But my wrath *was* inside me like a wrecking ball. I could feel it slamming against my rib cage as I sat on the bus on my way to the hospital the next day. My wrath was something sickening inside me. It made a ringing in my ears. It made me clammy and cold. And it alienated me from any decent feeling I'd ever had.

Okay, I would keep it to myself if that was what they wanted. I would say things they wanted to hear and be hypocritical. And I would probably die from it.

I'd get very sick at first, of course, with a headache and a

fever. I would lose my appetite and get dark circles under my eyes. They would have to call Larry. He would come to my room holding his ridiculous little black bag. "What's wrong, Gypsy?" he'd say.

But I wouldn't answer him or look at him, and I wouldn't let him touch me. Oh, my beautiful, beautiful Larry, who held Mom in your arms when she died and never ever told me about it, not all the times we spoke of her, not all the times you told me how it was with you and her when she was alive.

I love you more now than ever, knowing what I know about you now. And I hate you. And I can't cope with how I feel. And I don't even want to try.

CHAPTER

20

THE ROOM WAS all peach. Peach walls, peach striped draperies. The rug and couches were beige, and next to the desk where Mrs. Hilary sat was a huge mirror. Jeez, I thought, it's like a weight loss salon instead of a hospital.

I figured this lady was Mrs. Hilary anyway. I'd been wandering around the stupid hospital for twenty minutes already, getting lost. The whole place was crazy. I saw that right off. I was supposed to follow the orange lines on the walls to get to Mrs. Hilary's office, for instance. They make you follow different colored lines on the walls, like everybody is retarded. Thing is, I had to take the elevator, and when it stopped I got out the wrong door. That's another thing. You think you're facing the door in the elevator; then when it stops one opens behind you.

If you ask me, they go through an awful lot of trouble to confuse people. No wonder Larry is so tense sometimes. Anyway, when I got out of the elevator the lines on the wall were red instead of orange. And I was late. And Larry was going to kill me for being late.

Then a white-coated young doctor came up and offered help, and he reminded me of Larry and that sent a stab of misery

through me. But he directed me the right way, and now I stood in this doorway, breathless, holding my school books.

"Are you Mrs. Hilary?"

She looked up and smiled. It was the kind of smile that made you know she never hurried, never got lost, that nothing bad ever happened to her. She was wearing a beige suit to go with the rug. And she was in her fifties.

"Yes. And you're Nicki DeBonis," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry I'm late. I got lost."

"You're not late, Nicki, sit down. Don't be nervous." Her voice would have to be soft and kind. And I had it all fixed in my head to hate her. But I knew I wouldn't be able to.

I have this thing about women in their fifties, you see. My Mom would have been around this age now. So every time I get the chance to talk to a woman like this, I start imagining what Mom would be like and how I'd act with her.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Nicki. Your brother has told me a lot about you. Why don't you come in and sit down? Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared." I sat in the chair in front of her desk.

"Of course you are. You're starting a new venture and you're unsure of yourself, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. I felt the same way when I took this job seven years ago."

"You did?"

"Does that surprise you?" She smiled. "I'd been a volunteer myself in another capacity when my husband died of cancer and I had to get back into the work force. I was terrified. But I'd made friends here, and there were people who recognized my capabilities. When they asked me to take this job I didn't think I could do it. But I did."

"Your husband died of cancer?" I stared at her.

"Yes. And that was traumatic, but it's all behind me now. We can put some very bad things behind us if we try, Nicki. Now let's talk about you. This volunteer work wasn't your idea, was it?"

I felt myself blushing. I shook my head.

"You needn't be embarrassed. It would help if it were your

idea. But I get lots of young people because their parents want them here. You're here on your brother's orders."

I gaped at her. "He told you?"

"He came in the other day looking very dejected. I don't know," she sighed, "I guess I'm a mother figure or something because a lot of the doctors will stop in and chat when they get the chance." She smiled shyly. "I have to say I like it. Anyway, Dr. DeBonis came in and asked me if he could talk to me about his little sister." She smiled. "He's very appealing. I'm a little bit in love with him, I think."

"All the women are."

"Anyway, he told me how fond he is of you, and about his responsibility towards you. He said you'd misbehaved and he wanted to give you a sense of direction."

My lips were dry. "Did he tell you what I did?"

"No, and I didn't ask. But his concern for you is something rare. What matters is how you respond to it. He's worried you'll consider working here a punishment. I'm worried about that too, Nicki."

"It is."

"Well, that's between you and your brother. It doesn't have to be that way between you and me, does it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Many times when we think life is punishing us we find out differently. Meanwhile there are people here who need you. It may be only feeding a three-year-old in pediatrics. Or calming an uneasy patient in the recovery room. These people don't know why you're here, Nicki. They will only know *you* are here. You know, I've discovered there is no such thing as the pure volunteer spirit. People have all kinds of reasons for volunteering, some selfish, some guilt-ridden. I've found it's best not to examine the motivation. Those on the receiving end benefit, and that's all that matters. What do you think?"

She was waiting for my answer. Like we could resolve the problem together. "I think maybe you're right," I said.

CHAPTER

21

THERE ARE times in life when everything seems out of control, when the air is charged with conflicting vibes that scramble your brain cells. The last twenty-four hours had been like that for me. And, through it all, one thought had played on the nerve ends of my soul like a discordant tune.

Something very bad had happened in my life, and it had to do with my brother Larry. Not all parts of my brain had absorbed it yet. It was going to take getting used to.

He looked up at me from the corner table in the doctors' coffee shop. "Everything okay?"

I put the papers down on the table "If you sign them, I can take them back to Mrs. Hilary."

"Sure." He reached for his pen. "Why don't you sit down? You want a Coke?"

I sat down. I stared straight ahead. I didn't want to look at him. I hated him and loved him all at the same time and I felt wild and crazy. "I think I would like to have a cup of coffee," I said. I said it with quiet dignity. I think I was very good at it too.

The waitress came over. "You want something else?" he asked.

"I don't think I should ruin my appetite. Carol gets upset if I don't eat supper."

The waitress brought the coffee, and Larry watched me open the little cups of cream. "How'd you like Mrs. Hilary?"

"She's okay."

"I thought you'd like her."

He knows so much about me, I thought. I had no secrets from him. And there was no sense in sitting here, all prissy-like and pretending I did. I was just going to have to get some, that's all.

He was touching me now, leaning forward and tucking my hair behind my ear. "What department are you working in?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, hating myself because I wanted to tell him to take his hands off me, but I couldn't. He'd always been gentle and affectionate with me. Growing up I'd come to count on it.

Distance, I decided. I have to put distance between us. "Why don't you fill out the papers?" I said.

He started filling them out. He was really writing a lot now and I tried to read, upside down, what he was writing in the space for comments from parents. But I couldn't make it out. Then he finished and folded the papers up and put them in his coat pocket. "I'll return them to Mrs. Hilary. How much do you need for your uniform?"

"Fifteen dollars."

He put a twenty-dollar bill on the table. It lay there between us. "If you incur any other expenses let me know."

I finished my coffee and he finished his cigarette. "I was going to ask if you wanted to come to Winslow with me on Wednesday. The kids are putting on a skit. Jeremy's in it. But I guess now you don't want to."

I would have loved to go with him. I would have loved to see Jeremy in the play. He was studying me closely now, and I tried to control myself. I shook my head no, not trusting my voice.

"Okay," he got up. "I leave in half an hour. How 'bout a ride home?"

"No," I lied. "Carol's coming for me. Thank you very much."

CHAPTER

22

"MEREDITH? You wanna go to the supermarket?"

I'd been working in the hospital for a week. It was a sweet afternoon in late September, all gold and green, with early slanting shadows flung across streets like mine. On my street, a lot of the houses had the pumpkins and cornstalks on the front porches already.

We were walking out the side entrance of school. "I thought you had to work this afternoon," she said.

"No. Tomorrow. Meredith, I feel like filling up a big cart with junk food. Twinkies and corn chips and ice pops. The whole thing. Only we'll take two carts this time. You take one and I'll take one, and no fair leaving them in the aisle and running out 'til they're full to the top."

"Sure," she said.

Automatically we headed in the direction of the A & P on Hardenburg Street. Carol shopped there, and the only thing that worried me was that the manager might recognize me. But that was part of the fun, being afraid of being recognized.

"I hope you don't get in trouble," Meredith said. "You're on probation, aren't you?"

"Meredith, I'm *always* on probation. I've been on probation since I was born."

"You haven't told me about the hospital yet," Meredith said.

"I've only been there a week!"

"Do you like it, Nick? I'm worried about you. I feel responsible. It's my fault you're there."

"It's nobody's fault but my own. Now do you want to hear about the hospital or not?"

"I said I did."

"Okay." I thought for a moment. "I tell you, it takes getting used to, Meredith. There's a doctor there who's a brain surgeon. He operates on people for maybe ten or twelve hours at a stretch. The night before an operation, he doesn't eat or drink anything from seven o'clock on."

"Why?"

"So he doesn't have to go to the bathroom in the middle of an operation."

"Neat."

"Yeah. And when he's about halfway through a nurse gets him a chocolate milkshake to keep up his strength. And she holds it for him while he sips it. Don't you love it?"

"What does he look like?"

"He's real short and he has a bald head, and he looks like an insurance salesman. And he walks through the halls real fast and keeps his eyes down on the floor."

"What else?" she said.

"There's this little black kid in pediatrics. That's where I work. He sleeps all the time. He was playing on the train tracks near Kingsway Avenue. You know that place where the kids sneak onto the tracks?"

"Yeah."

"He climbed on top of a train and touched a wire. It almost fried him out."

"Oh, I remember reading about that in the paper a few weeks ago."

"His mother is Larry's housekeeper. They had to cut his arm

off. I can't stand it when I think about it. His arm! He just lays there and sleeps. The nurses say it's an escape because he can't face up to what happened. They have to wake him to feed him."

"Do you feed him?"

"No, but I went in with another candy-striper when she did it. He ate for her, and we talked to him. And you know what else? A couple of the nurses said my brother is paying a lawyer to sue the railroad because they don't have that yard fenced off properly there."

We had one more block to walk. "How can you stand it, Nick?"

"It's not so bad. I get to feed the little kids and sometimes read to them. I went into Intensive Care already. I wasn't supposed to, but I went with Julie—she's another candy-striper. She had to deliver some extra blankets. It was almost empty except for this one woman who was in a car accident. She was trapped in the car, burned, for about an hour before anybody came. I'm sorry I went now. I dreamed about her the other night."

"Gross. Is she gonna live?"

"They don't know." We were in front of the supermarket now. In the sunlight she stood looking at me. There were tears in the corners of her grey eyes. "I don't think your brother should be making you do this. You're too sensitive."

"No, Meredith, I'm okay. It's only a week and I don't get queasy when I walk into the place anymore. And the little kids are so appreciative when I feed them or read to them. They look up to me. Like I'm somebody. I'm the youngest in the family so I never had anybody looking up to me. Someday I'll be married, and I should know something about little kids."

The scrunched-up look on her face softened. "I never thought of that."

"There's just one thing. It's a whole different *world* in there, Meredith. Once you're in, it's like the outside world doesn't exist. And another thing I've noticed. All the patients are like children. So it doesn't matter whether you work with kids or

not. They're *all* like children. There's something wrong with that."

"Wow, Nick, you're getting awfully deep. Not everybody would notice that."

"Yeah, well, Tony always says I'm observant. He says I should be a writer. I get vibes about people." I closed my eyes for a moment. I had to tell somebody all this. In a week I'd absorbed so much that if I didn't tell somebody I might self-destruct. When Tony or Carol asked I just told them I was doing fine. I'd seen Larry several times in the hospital but I'd gone out of my way to avoid him.

"Meredith, some people who work there accept all the terrible things that happen to people. I'm never going to accept things like they do. I think as long as you don't accept certain things they aren't okay. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," she breathed, wide-eyed.

"Like they're all excited because tomorrow this kid named Greg Arbuck is coming back to visit. He was a burn victim there for months. He's coming up to pediatrics, and all the nurses can't wait. Thing is, Meredith, he can't *hear* anymore. The nurses said the medication the doctors gave him to make him well made him deaf. They accept that!"

"I think you need some fun, Nick," she said gravely. "You've been too good. Let's go inside and fill up the shopping carts, okay?"

"Sure."

"I'll even let you have the frozen food aisle this time. After that we can go to the Pizza Palace for supper."

"I have to be home for supper. Tony won't like it if I call and say I'm going to Pizza Palace."

"Who cares what Tony likes or doesn't like?"

"I do. I have to, Meredith." We were inside the supermarket now. "Tony and Larry are my brothers. They're all the family I have. I have to care what they like. Besides, I love them."

"You said you didn't love Larry anymore."

"Well," I said, "I've got him on hold."

CHAPTER

23

"IS THAT YOU, Greg? Is it really you?"

I was straightening up the solarium the kids played in at the end of the pediatrics wing when I heard Nurse Quilan yell.

"I can't believe it's you!"

All the nurses were congregating in front of the nurses' station at the end of the hall now, and I went to see what was going on.

A red-haired young man of about twenty stood in the middle of them, and one by one they were going up to him and kissing him.

"You filled *out* so much!"

"You were so skinny when you were here!"

"We couldn't get you to eat!"

Greg Arbuck was enjoying it all. He was dressed in a plaid flannel shirt which, I guessed, hid the scars on his arms. He was wearing jeans. His hair grew in every which-way. And his voice was the voice of one who couldn't hear himself speak.

"I'm learning to read lips," he said. "I've been going to a school for the deaf. I'm learning sign language." He did some sign language.

"What does that mean?" a young nurse asked.

"You're pretty," he said.

"You never *noticed* before," she squealed.

"You all better watch out. He can get around now." Dr. Ramsey came up to the group, beaming like he'd created Greg in less than seven days. It was he who had set up the burn unit at Runnymede Memorial. He was skinny and wore a grey crew cut, and he was dressed in surgical blues now, with a camera slung around his neck. He started snapping pictures of Greg with the nurses.

"I can't believe it," Nurse Halpern was saying. "Seeing him makes it all worth it, Dr. Ramsey."

"That's what I want to hear," he told them. "That's one reason we wanted Greg to visit. To encourage those of you who may have to work with burn victims."

The elevator doors slid open down the hall, and my brother stepped out. He was wearing street clothes. I stepped back behind the others, seeing him. "Greg!" and Larry rushed over to him, grabbed his hand and searched his face in disbelief, then embraced him. "My God, you're beautiful!"

Greg looked at him, shook his head, and pointed to his ear. "I can't hear," he said. "Say it again."

"Of course," Larry said. "I know. I'm sorry. I said *you're beautiful!*"

Greg laughed. "Because of you," he said.

"No," Larry pointed to Dr. Ramsey, "because of him."

Greg shook his head violently. "Him, yes, but *you* got me to eat, remember?"

"Do I remember?" Larry laughed. "I've got reservations for us at Marcellino's. For six o'clock."

"Marcellino's!" Everybody roared. I didn't get it.

"Come on," Dr. Ramsey said, "we've got other floors to visit. There's a lady with second degree burns downstairs. A heart victim. I want you to talk to her, Greg. She's discouraged."

Dr. Ramsey, Greg, and my brother walked down the hall to the elevator.

"What's at Marcellino's?" I asked Nurse Halpern.

She looked at me. "When Greg was here we couldn't get him to eat," she explained. "Burn victims have to eat a lot so their tissue gets repaired. Your brother would come by every day and coax him to eat. But he wouldn't. Finally your brother asked him what foods he liked best. Greg said he was crazy about Italian. So your brother went to talk to the owner of Marcellino's Restaurant and got him to hand-deliver Greg's favorite foods here every day. They did it free of charge. That got him eating again."

She looked at me, her grey eyes wide with emotion. "It saved Greg's life," she said. "Didn't your brother ever tell you?"

CHAPTER

24

I WAS STANDING inside the double glass doors of Runnymede Memorial in my navy blue blazer and yellow striped uniform, leaning against the metal handle and looking out into the onrushing dark. I was waiting for Tony's car to come around the circular drive. It had turned cold. An unexpected cold front had come down from Canada.

Tomorrow was my fifteenth birthday.

Today, this afternoon, had been Eric's hearing. I could barely wait for Tony to pick me up so I could find out the result.

And then Eric's Mustang came around the circular drive. I couldn't believe it! I ran out the glass door to the edge of the walk. He stopped and got out. And then he stood there looking at me over the hood of his car.

"Probation," he said.

I squealed in joy and ran around the car into his arms. He picked me up and swung me around, once, twice, three times. Then he hugged me close. "Happy Birthday," he murmured into my hair.

"Oh, Eric, it's the best present, ever!"

"I'd take you out to celebrate, but Coach wants us both back at the house for supper in an hour."

"Oh, let's not go straight home. Let's drive around a while, please."

We drove through town. The wind was picking up, almost gusting now. Main Street was deserted. Lights from closed-up shops winked at us in the dark. Eric put the heater on because I was shivering in my cotton uniform. Then he reached around and got his tweed suit jacket off the back seat. "Here, cover your legs."

I spread the jacket on my lap. He was wearing his grey flannel slacks and crew-neck sweater over his striped dress shirt. "You look nice, Eric."

"So do you. I love you in your uniform."

"I look like a washed-out yellow candy stick."

"Coach said I can play in the Cherry Hill game tomorrow."

"Oh, Eric! And I'm working!"

"Couldn't you get off?" He pulled into one of the semi-vertical parking places in front of the court house. Runnymede is the county seat, and the court house is very impressive-looking with a large green in front, which was now deserted.

"Larry asked me today in the hospital if I wanted tomorrow off for my birthday," I said. "I was stacking empty food trays on the cart, and he came up all of a sudden-like."

"I thought you two weren't talking."

"We aren't. Today was the first time he came up to me and talked since I've been at the hospital. I was so surprised I was tongue-tied. I told him it didn't matter. If I'd *known* you were playing, though. . . ."

He shifted his weight around to face me. "How are you going to make out at your birthday dinner tomorrow night if you aren't talking? That ought to be a fun party."

"I don't know, Eric. They're making such a fuss, getting a cake and everything. I don't want to think about it. Right now, for me, it's like having a free ticket on the Titanic."

"They do it every year, don't they?"

"Uh huh. We always go to Wittgenstein's. My father's friend owns it, and my father used to take my mother there *ages* ago. It's okay. All those funny waiters in short pants and suspenders, and a lot of German music and songs. Oh, Eric, I wish you could come. You're *invited*."

"You know I promised Mom I'd take her to her sister's in Roselle. It's her anniversary and she gets blue. I can't leave her alone." He moved, reached below the seat, and put something in my lap. "Here, I wanted to give you this when we were alone."

"Oh, what is it?" In the semi-dark, the paper glistened and rustled. Inside the white square box was a delicately painted, enameled jewelry box. I lifted it from the tissue. "Oh, it's beautiful!"

"Open the lid."

When I did, the heartbreaking notes of "Evergreen," my favorite song, tinkled with precision-like sadness in the dark. Tears came to my eyes. "Eric, I love it. But the best present, ever, is your probation."

"That wouldn't have happened without Coach. The judge was impressed 'cause I was in his custody. And because I went through the Lifers' Program. And I gotta tell you something else too."

There was more. I didn't know if I could bear any more.

"Before we went to the hearing today we talked, Coach and me. He told me that he knew the rumors had reached me, that he wanted to clear them up. He apologized for not doing it before. You know what he said, Nick?"

"No. What?"

"He said he wished he *were* my father."

I smiled at him even though I was crying. "I'm glad he's not."

He leaned over then and kissed me. "C'mon, let's get back. They're waiting supper. It's gonna be sort of a celebration."

CHAPTER

25

"WILL YOU HAVE some coffee with me? I'm Mara Lauffer. You're Dr. DeBonis's sister, aren't you? Could we talk?"

She was tall and slender, and her dark hair fell to her shoulders with a fringe of thick bangs over her forehead. And all of it was just a framework for the large, haunting eyes.

Mara Lauffer had been living in Intensive Care for two weeks now, lying on a mat on the floor at night next to her husband.

Her husband was dying of bone cancer. He was twenty-four.

She was a fixture at the hospital. When he slept she would wander around helping out, talking to patients.

I was in the peds' kitchen, stacking milk and juice cartons in the refrigerator. "I can go on break in a minute," I said.

The Watering Hole was the first-floor coffee shop. It was full of nurses on break. We got our coffee and carried it to a table in the far corner. Mara hugged her cup in her hands. "How do you like what you're doing?"

"It's okay."

"You want to be a nurse?"

I made a face. "No."

She giggled. "Me neither. I've learned so much in the year

that Martin's been sick. This is the fourth hospital he's been in. We started out with your brother when Martin came down with a stiff neck. We went the whole route. Martin ended up in Sloan Kettering in New York, and they operated on him five times. Then they told him there was no more they could do."

She sipped her coffee. "He wanted to come back home and put himself in your brother's care." She took a deep breath. "Do you want to know what your brother did for Martin?"

I was ready for anything. If she told me Larry had multiplied loaves and fishes in the doctors' lounge I'd believe her.

"Well, you know Martin's paralyzed from the neck down, and he's terminal. So when we got back to this hospital we asked if we could have Laetrile. It's legal in New Jersey. All you need is the okay of the attending physician. But in cases of using an unusual drug like this, the doctor goes before a hospital board. So he isn't out on a limb. You understand?"

I nodded.

"In the beginning, your brother wasn't convinced about the Laetrile but he brought it to the board anyway. Then I had to go before the board and present my case, tell why I wanted it for Martin. They turned me down. So I went home and prayed. I'm very religious. I belong to this prayer group, and a few members have come to live with us to help care for my baby. We prayed together. And then in a couple of days the phone rang at home. It was your brother. He said he'd given it a lot of thought. And that, as Martin's doctor, he would allow the Laetrile. He said he'd gone back before the board and convinced them to go along with him."

I felt the tears in back of my throat.

"It took a lot for him to do that. Change his mind, I mean, and go back before the board. It was a mind-breaking decision. And he's agreed to let me take Martin home. Oh, he didn't want to do that at first, but I've got people to help me care for Martin, and so he gave in. And he's agreed to go on being Martin's doctor until the end. That's a lot, you know. It involves house visits and all. But he's agreed to see it through."

We sat in silence drinking our coffee. "Is this too much for you?" she asked.

"No."

"You're so young. You could be his daughter."

"I'm fifteen today."

"Oh, *are* you! Oh, we should have some cake or something!"

"It's okay. My family's taking me out tonight."

"I saw you in Pediatrics a few times," she said, "and they told me you were Dr. DeBonis's sister. I can see the resemblance. I wanted to meet you. I worship your brother, do you mind?"

"No. Everybody does."

"Thanks for being a friend to me, Nicki. For listening. I wanted somebody to know all this."

"I'm glad you told me, Mara."

She nodded, looking at me. "You have his eyes," she said.

CHAPTER

26

THE RESTAURANT was crowded when we got there at eight. Our booth was reserved, away from the band in a quiet corner—table for four. But Larry was late. He'd called before we left. One of his mothers was about to deliver. He had said that we should get started without him.

We were finished with our soup and salad when he finally came. My back was to the entrance, so I didn't see him come in. I saw Tony look up, then felt somebody lean over me.

"Happy Birthday, Gypsy," and he brushed the side of my face with a kiss and set an oblong box next to my plate. He slid in the booth opposite me, next to Carol. Tony was on my right.

You would have thought the stupid box was ticking, the way I looked at it. It was wrapped in silver and white paper with a pink ribbon. I looked at Larry. He was joking with Tony, smiling at Carol, asking her if she minded if he ordered wine. No, she didn't. Then he was joking with the waitress who was taking his order—and who was in love with him in three minutes flat. Several people in the room turned to look at him and smile. He's that way. He walks into a room and it comes alive.

The baby he'd delivered was a girl. "Forty-eight minutes flat," he told us. "All my mothers should be that good. I told her it was my sister's birthday so she's going to name it Nicole. Natural childbirth, Carol."

I knew about natural childbirth. He and Carol talked about it enough. I could see him in his sterile blues, talking the mother through the birth. Giver of life. It sounded corny. And then I thought of Mom, and how he'd held her when she died, and I felt a surge of humility all of a sudden, and it was not corny at all.

Our prime ribs came, and Larry said we should start. He was working on his salad, pouring a glass of wine for himself and one for Tony. "Shall we toast our little sister?" he asked.

Carol and I had sparkling water. Larry made the toast. "To our little sister, who's given us a lot of responsibility. And a lot of enjoyment. And who, if she gets any prettier, is going to soon be a matter of grave concern to us both."

I would have cried right then if Carol hadn't suggested that I open my present. "Let her eat first," Larry said quietly. His voice ripped a hole inside me a mile wide.

"You want me to unwrap it for you?" Tony asked. I nodded. He did so, and I put my fork down and lifted the box lid.

It was a silver charm bracelet with four charms on it. I just stared at it, dumb-like, while Carol murmured how beautiful it was and Tony kicked me under the table.

"It's beautiful," I said.

Larry set his cigarette in the ashtray and took the bracelet. "Hold still. Damn, you never could hold still." He fastened it on my wrist.

"Doesn't he get a kiss?" Tony asked.

We looked at each other across the table, Larry and I, and it was like we'd just crawled out of a train wreck. "Let her finish her dinner," he said. "I'll get my kiss later."

His meal came, and we all concentrated on eating. I was starving. The prime rib had natural gravy, and it was on one of

those pewter platters with adorable little roast potatoes and pearl onions.

"What did you get for your birthday?" Larry looked at me suddenly.

"I got this suit I'm wearing, from Tony and Carol. And the blouse. It's a designer blouse. And the suit is camel, and Carol says that's my color because of my hair."

He nodded approvingly. "It's your style, too. Classic. What about Eric. I hear he gave you something special?"

I blushed. He was looking at me so attentively I was embarrassed, but he was looking at me like my old Larry again.

"Just a music box that plays 'Evergreen.' It's my favorite song."

"Good, because the band's going to play it in about ten minutes, and I'd like you to dance with me."

He'd arranged it with the band. He knew it was my favorite song. And when the band struck it up after a few minutes he got up and held out his hand. There was nothing to do but let him lead me to the dance floor. There were three other couples out there already, and before we started dancing he looked down at me, still holding my wrist.

"How many times have we danced together?"

"I don't know. Lots."

"Then why is your hand so cold, and why is your pulse racing?"

"It's cold in here."

"It is not cold in here."

"Well, it's not fair, your feeling my pulse."

He drew me close. I was surprised at how easy it was to let him do that, surprised at how familiar and safe it was in the protective embrace of his arms. Like coming home after a very long time. He is very considerate and gentle when he dances with me. He treats me very grown-up. He whirled me around expertly, and in a few minutes I was enjoying myself, forgetting my anger at him.

"I won't tell you that I miss you." The music slowed and drifted, and he was looking down at me. "But I have to tell you that Molly does. And so does Ruderman. And Jeremy."

"How are they?"

"Fine. Molly's doing great in school. Ruderman is as much hell on wheels as she always was, and she's on me constantly because you don't come around anymore. And Jeremy asks for you."

There was nothing I could possibly say to all this without breaking down, so I said nothing.

"I understand you're doing fine work at the hospital. I've had nothing but good reports about you."

It was time now to talk of the hospital, of how he'd helped Mara Lauffer and the little boy in Pediatrics with one arm. And Greg Arbuck. But I couldn't get the words out. I'd never be able to tell him that every day when I came home and took off the yellow and white uniform, I shed a little more of my security, that I was a little less certain of things I'd never questioned before.

I'd never be able to tell him that I loved him enough to make me burst inside every time I thought of him holding Mom the moment she died. No matter what happened between us, all my life I'd love him for that. I'd never be able to tell him any of these things.

"Tony says the hospital may be too much for you. It isn't affecting your schoolwork, is it?" He drew back and looked at me, even as we kept time to the sweet, sad music. "I haven't gotten a report card yet. Am I going to see some improvements this year?"

I couldn't answer at all. He just drew me close again. "I know how you feel about me, Nicki. And I understand. But I had no idea you'd take it all so badly. I wouldn't have done what I did if I'd had any idea how it would affect you. It's important to me that you believe that, Nicki."

I nodded.

"I love you, honey. And I'd like you to need me again. But if you don't I'll stay in the background."

He was resting his chin on top of my head. The music stopped. We were standing in the shadows by the bandstand, and the tears were starting. They were coming down my face. He wiped them with his hand and kissed my forehead. "You've got Tony. You're all right with Tony. You always were. If and when you decide you want to pick up with me again I'll be there. Any way you want to handle it, okay?"

"Larry. . . ."

He shook his head. "It's okay. I don't believe that people have to smother each other just because they're related. I went through that with the old man. I won't do that to you."

Everybody had left the dance floor. We were alone there in the shadows. I looked up at him. His brown eyes had never been so brown and shining. And I realized, standing there, that they were shining with tears.

I wore the silver bracelet to school every day for the next four weeks. That was the next time I talked to him again.

CHAPTER

27

FOUR WEEKS after my birthday, the phone rang at dinner one evening. Tony got up to answer. "It's Larry," he said. "He wants to talk to you."

I went into the kitchen and picked up the receiver.

"Nick? You have a minute? I gotta talk to you."

My heart lurched. When was the last time he'd said that? "Sure."

"It's about your friend, Meredith. She came to see me today, Nick."

Something in the tone. Something I should be getting, but I didn't get it. "What for?"

"Don't you know?"

"Am I supposed to?"

He was silent for a minute. "Nick, I shouldn't be telling you this, I guess. In a way, I'm breaking a patient's confidence. But she isn't my patient. I couldn't do what she wanted."

Every nerve end in my body came to life. "What did she want you to do, Larry?" But I knew. You always do know these things. Nobody has to spell them out for you.

"She's pregnant. I thought that . . . being her best friend. . . ."

"My God." I sat down at the breakfast nook in the darkened kitchen. My head was swimming.

"You there, Nick?"

"I'm here."

"You didn't know," the voice came in the dark. "I'm sorry, honey. Maybe I shouldn't have told you."

"Of *course* you should have told me. Why did she come to see you?"

Silence again. "Why do you think, Nick?"

A jumble of thoughts fought for room in my mind. "What . . . did you tell her?"

He sighed. "We didn't get very far. Anyway, you know I always talk to my patients first. Right off, she told me what she wanted. I told her I don't do abortions. Jeez, I felt rotten saying it. Holier than thou. For the first time in my career, I felt that maybe I was wrong. I told her I'd make a call to a clinic for her." He sighed again. "We didn't get very far on that either, but she did tell me that they would need money for the clinic. Said she and the boy, Jeff, are going to Tony tomorrow. To ask him for money. She says Jeff thinks Tony will give it to them. Seems the kids on the team go to Tony for all kinds of things. What the hell's he doing there, running an outreach center?"

"Larry, I don't think Tony would. . . ."

"Of course he wouldn't! But it's gonna kill him, Nick. You know how straight he is. That's why I called you. She ran out on me, Nick. You've got to get to her. Tell her to come back here and give me a chance to talk to her. Don't let her go to Tony. He couldn't give her the money if he wanted to. Can you talk to her?"

"Her father will kill her if he finds out."

"I know that, Nick." He sounded terribly sad. "I'm involved in this now. I feel responsible because she came to me and I couldn't handle it with her."

"You're not so easy to talk to sometimes, Larry."

There was a long silence. "I know," he said. "How have you been, Nicki?"

"I've been okay."

"I didn't want to bother you. What I said about giving you room, well, I meant it."

"I know."

"Well, we're talking at least, aren't we?"

"I don't know if this counts," I said. I sort of laughed, but I was shaking.

"Yeah, I don't know either. Well, we've got to put our personal feelings aside now and help your friend. I need your help on this, Nick. I feel like I've blown it. Or I wouldn't have bothered you. Do your best, will you, Gypsy? Don't let her go to Tony."

CHAPTER

28

I COULDN'T get to Meredith the next day. We had only one class together, Halsey's algebra class. And she ran out of the room as soon as the bell rang.

Friday night Runnymede was going for its nineteenth straight win. Harrison was tough and out to end our winning streak. Everybody was out to end our winning streak. And the newspapers were on Tony, saying he was going after the high scores. "What the hell do they think it's about?" he'd said to Carol at breakfast. Last night he'd told a sportswriter off on the phone. And he was worried about fights tonight. He knew Harrison players would be going after ours on the field. "The referees aren't going to be with us," he'd said. He was in a great mood, I could see that, for Jeff to go to him and ask for money.

It was warm for the first week in November, sixty-some degrees. It could have been freezing, I felt so desolate inside. The stands were packed, and I sat with Carol and Coach Hedden's wife. I couldn't even enjoy the game, for crying out loud, because I was looking for Meredith. I was sore as anything at

her, if you really want to know. Just for being pregnant in the first place. I'd just about ruined my relationship with Larry because I'd done something to try to help her avoid such a mess. What was she, dumb or something? All you had to *do*, for crying out loud, was pop one of those stupid pills in your mouth every night. Even I knew that.

Runnymede made two touchdowns before the first quarter was over. I could see that our defense was playing tough. Harrison got the ball on the five-yard line twice and couldn't score. Tony and the other Runnymede coaches were pretty wild by the second quarter. Runnymede had already gotten two penalties. Harrison's kids were really after ours, with jabs and punches.

I was taking a walk near the forty-yard line when Eric made his touchdown. He ran forty-seven yards with nine minutes and fifty-seven seconds left in the second quarter. Everybody in the stands went wild.

"Nicki!"

It was Larry, and he had Jeremy with him. I pushed my way through the crowd at the refreshment stand with a mouthful of hotdog, and a Coke in one hand. There was Larry in his corduroy jacket with a black turtleneck under it. "Did you see it? Did you see Eric's touchdown?"

"I saw it. Beautiful." He leaned down to kiss me. "Come on, let's get away from the crowd."

"Hello, Jeremy." I remembered him then. His eyes were on the action on the field.

"Let's go back to our seats." He pulled on Larry's sleeve.

"Don't you even say hello?" Larry said.

"Hello, Nicki. Can I have a hot dog, Dr. Larry?"

Larry was digging into his pocket already, coming out with two one-dollar bills. "Did you tell Nicki your news?"

Jeremy stood looking at the money in his hand. "I'm going home soon."

"Well, don't sound so happy about it," and Larry nudged him. "Don't you want to see your mother for Christmas?"

Jeremy ignored that. "How come you don't come and see me anymore?" he asked me.

"I've been busy, Jeremy. I'll get there soon."

"Sure, you'll get there and I'll be gone," he said angrily.

"Hey!" Larry said to him.

He looked up defiantly. "What?"

"You know what. I've told you not to be fresh to people just because you've got problems. Now go get your hot dog."

He ran off. Larry thrust his hands into his pockets and gave me a grin. "He goes," he shrugged.

"You'll miss him?"

"Yeah, I'll miss him. What the hell, I haven't had you."

Oh my God, I thought. "That's not fair," I countered.

"No, I guess not. I'm doing just what I promised you I wouldn't do. Great game, isn't it? Tony's doing a fine job with the team. Their defense is tough, and their passing game is finally what it should be. Did you see her today?"

"No. I worked after school."

He nodded. "They got to Tony, then."

"I don't know. He was gone when I got home from the hospital. He left for the field house early."

He nodded again. And it occurred to me that it was still painful for us to talk. I cursed Meredith under my breath, standing there.

Jeremy was coming back now, and then there was a commotion on the field. I ran over to the fence to see what was going on. One of our players was tangling with a player from Harrison. The referee was yelling and waving his arms. Our player came jogging off the field, and everybody in the Runnymede stands was booing and hissing.

"It's Jeff," I said dismally. "He got thrown out of the game for fighting." I could see Tony leaning over Jeff, who had his helmet off and was wiping his face with his arm. Tony was bawling him out, I could tell.

"It wasn't Jeff's fault." I turned on Larry. "Those kids have been after ours all night. Why don't they get penalized?"

"Sometimes the wrong people do," he said. "Look, I've got to get Jeremy back to the stands. We can't stay beyond the third quarter. Try to get to her, will you, Nick?"

"I'll try."

"And call me, please, if you need me."

"Leave me alone, Nicki DeBonis! Just leave me. Your stupid brother's been on Jeff all night! What was Jeff supposed to do? That idiot, McFee, from Harrison, kicked him right out in the open."

She had confetti in her blonde hair, and she was crying. The game was over; the band was playing its victory song over and over. Runnymede had won, 23–0. People were streaming past us towards the exit, jubilant because of the win. And my best friend stood a few feet away from me, her profile etched in my memory forever, wearing Jeff's wool zip-up varsity jacket, confetti in her hair. And pregnant.

And crying. Not because Tony had been on Jeff. She was crying because Runnymede had won nineteen straight and the band was going nuts and excitement was in the fall night air. And soon it would be dark, and there would be no more band, no more people—only the cold wind howling around her in her room. Alone and pregnant.

"Tony's a maniac on the field," I said. "Everybody knows that."

"I hate him."

That was her way of telling me. "Tony wouldn't give you and Jeff the money," I said.

"Big deal coach. 'Come to me with your problems,' he tells the kids. What good is he, anyway?"

"Sometimes no good. You gotta forget about Tony giving you the money, Meredith. He'd lose his job if he did. And forget about Larry doing the abortion, too. Larry just . . . he won't do it. Let him talk to you, though. He can help."

"He wouldn't know how to help an old lady across the street."

"Yes he would," I said staunchly. "He's a good doctor, Meredith."

"Well, you can have your precious brothers. Jeff's going to his parents. That's what coach said to do, anyway."

"And then what?"

"What do you think?"

"When, Meredith?" I could barely speak.

"We're off Thursday and Friday for Teachers' Convention, aren't we? I won't miss any school."

"Where?"

"The clinic on Stuyvesant Street just outside town. Jeff will take me and bring me home. I'll go to bed a couple of days and tell my Mom I have the flu."

I felt a rush of alarm. "Not *there*, Meredith. I've heard about that place. There are lots better places. They don't do follow-ups. That's what Larry said. I've heard stories about people who went there."

"Yeah, well you know what you can do with your stories."

"Meredith, I have some money if you need it. *Please* don't go there, Meredith!"

"It's all decided, Nicki. I don't wanna hear anymore."

I couldn't talk for a minute, I felt so bad. "You need a ride home?" I asked.

"I'm waiting for Jeff to come out of the field house. If your brother ever lets him out."

"I gotta go then, Meredith." But I hesitated.

"You can't tell anybody, Nicki. Where I'm going and when, I mean. Promise you won't tell. Anybody. If you do we aren't friends anymore. And I mean it."

I bit my lip. "All right," I said grudgingly. "But you've gotta promise to call me if you need me."

"Only if you don't tell!"

I made an instant decision. Her friendship was more important to me than telling. All the neat times we'd had, all the secrets, all the tricks we'd pulled in supermarkets and school; everything was piled on one side. On the other was her anguish

and pain. But I couldn't balance it out. "I'll see ya, Meredith." And I ran off into the dark.

At the gate I turned. She was still standing there, in Jeff's blue and white jacket which was way too big on her. And she still had confetti in her hair. And she was still crying.

CHAPTER

29

THE FOLLOWING week it turned cold. Temperatures dropped, and the wind picked up something awful. I barely saw Meredith in school. She avoided me. She was on my mind all Wednesday night as the wind howled around the house.

On Thursday morning, the day she was supposed to go to the clinic, Tony came into my room and sat down gently on my bed.

"We're leaving in half an hour, Nick. I wanted to talk to you first. Are you up, Nick?"

"I'm up," I said sleepily.

"You're to work on your English paper today. You are not to have Eric over. Larry will pick you up for supper."

He and Carol were going to New York to see a Broadway show and have dinner with friends. He was all dressed up in his new three-piece suit, and he was wearing the gold pocket watch Carol had given him one Christmas. He was freshly shaven and he smelled good.

"You are not to go to the clinic with Meredith today," he said, "you hear me?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him fully now. "How do you know she's going today?"

"I have my sources," he smiled. "Promise me you won't go to the clinic. I can't allow you to do that. Say, 'I promise, Tony.' "

"I promise, Tony."

"Be ready when Larry comes to pick you up for supper."

"Did they ask you for the money?"

"What?"

"Jeff and Meredith. They asked you for money for an abortion, didn't they?"

"Yes, Nick, they asked me for the money."

"She told Larry she was going to. He was afraid you'd get shook up if they did. I tried to stop her from going to you but I couldn't."

"I am not shook up, Nick. I handled it. I feel bad, yes. The same as you. And Larry. But there are some things we just can't do anything about. The trick is to recognize them and not break your heart. I'm in my thirties, Nick, and I'm just starting to learn the trick. Be good now, will you?"

I promised him everything he wanted. He kissed me and left.

But I could not keep my promise. That afternoon, around four, the phone rang. I really was working on my English paper. I'd been working on it all day. But, somehow, when the phone rang I knew it was ominous.

"Nicki?"

"Meredith. How are you?"

"I'm no good, Nick. I'm stinko. Really lousy."

My heart lurched. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sick."

"How? Meredith I've been thinking about you all day. Did you. . . ."

"I had it done late yesterday. After school. Just in case anybody tried to stop me today. Something's wrong, Nick. I'm bleeding something awful."

"*Meredith!*"

"My Mom thinks I have the flu. I can't call Jeff. He wouldn't know what to do. I didn't know who else to call."

"Oh, Meredith! I'll be right over. I'll be there in ten minutes."

I was careful to lock the house and take my key. The weather had really turned ugly now. Dark clouds hung in the sky, and the wind took my breath away as I got on my bike and pedaled in the direction of her house. I'd put on my grey hooded sweatshirt under my down vest, and it was a good thing too.

It had rained yesterday and a lot of leaves were torn from the trees. All winter I'd have to look at the naked trees now, bucking the wind. The damned wind never brings good things. I'd heard frightening things in it last night, things I could never name, but all of which can name me.

"Hello, Mrs. Mitchell, how's Meredith?"

She was cutting out a pattern on the dining room table.

"Sleeping. You think you should go up? It's the flu."

I don't know how some parents can be so stupid. I think they want to be stupid. I'll say one thing; lots of times I wish I had parents until I see the parents of some of the kids I go to school with and find out what air-heads they are.

I have Meredith's mother figured. She's a cop-out. One of those people who can't face up to anything, so she pretends certain problems just don't exist. Smiles all the time.

"I'll be okay. I think I have lots of immunities from working at the hospital." She'd swallow anything, you could count on that. Because she wanted to.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

I went up.

"Hi, Meredith." I sat on the side of the bed. All I could see was her tousled blonde hair. She was doubled over. Her face was very pale.

" 'Lo, Nick."

I did not know what to do. But I knew I had to do something. "What did they tell you at the clinic, Meredith? What did they tell you to do if this happens?"

"Not much. Just go to bed."

I put my hand on her forehead. She was burning up.

"Meredith, we've got to *do* something!" I was not allowed to take temperatures at the hospital. But my brother Larry had stuck a thermometer in my mouth often enough when I was sick for me to know how. I ran down the hall to the bathroom and found a thermometer in the medicine chest. I shook it down like I'd seen Larry do. Then I put it in her mouth. "Under your tongue," I ordered. "It goes under."

I waited a few minutes and took it out. Her temperature was one hundred and four.

"You've got to have a doctor, Meredith."

"I can't. What will I tell my mom?"

"To hell with your mom. I can't let you die. You could *die*!" Oh God, I was frightening her. I didn't mean to do that.

"I don't want our family doctor to know," she wailed. "I don't want anybody to know."

"My brother makes house calls."

"I ran out on him, Nick. He won't come."

"He will if I ask him."

"He won't tell my mom? You promise?"

"I promise," I said.

"Larry will come, Mrs. Mitchell. He makes house calls."

"I don't know, Nicki. Don't doctors want you to have a temperature for twenty-four hours before you call?"

"Meredith should have a doctor, Mrs. Mitchell. I don't mean to tell you what to do, but I think she should be in the hospital."

She looked at me. "You're right," she said. "You sure he won't mind, now?"

"He won't mind." My voice was so shaky I could barely control it as I dialed Larry's number.

* * *

I had to get by Ruderman first, of course. "He's with a patient, Nicki." Clearly, she was annoyed with me.

"I need him now, Ruderman. Please tell him." He'd given her instructions once that if I ever called with that request I was to be put right through. But I'd never before used it.

"Okay, hold on." She put me on hold. Some stupid music came on. Violins and piano. I waited and waited, then finally the music went off and a button clicked.

"Yes, Nicki." The voice was smooth and patient.

"Larry," I said. And then my voice broke. "Larry, I need you."

He was there in fifteen minutes.

I was never so glad to see anybody in my life. I stood on the landing holding my breath when he came in and introduced himself to Meredith's mother. I couldn't wait for her to shut up and stop her stupid chatter as she took his coat. I couldn't wait to get him away from her. She asked me to take him upstairs, thank heaven, and I did, my legs shaking. At the top of the stairs I turned to him. "Larry, she's . . . I'm scared, Larry."

He nodded and smiled at me. "It'll be okay. Come on, don't quit on me now."

She stirred in bed. Then she saw Larry and started to cry.

"Hey, come on now," he said. "What's Nicki been telling you about me? I'm not that bad a doctor." He sat on the side of the bed and smiled at her and pushed her hair from her face, his hand resting on her forehead for a second. Then he put his hand under her chin. "You're going to be okay. No tears now, they won't help."

I loved him more in that moment than I ever thought I could love anybody.

"Nicki," he said, without turning, "why don't you wait outside. Close the door, please, when you go."

I made small talk with Meredith's mother in the kitchen. She

offered me coffee and I took it, just to have something to do. I was standing at the kitchen table when Larry came down about fifteen minutes later. He set his bag down on a chair.

And then he stood there and told Meredith's mother that Meredith had a bad case of the flu. A new strain, he said. And he'd like to hospitalize her for a few days and keep her under observation.

"If it's okay with you, Mrs. Mitchell, I'll call the hospital and get her a bed," he said.

He didn't look at me when he said this. He went right to the wall phone and dialed. He had to wait a few moments to be put through and he was very authoritative, identifying himself and getting action at the hospital. He even managed a smile for her. "It's just for observation," he assured her.

But I know Larry. And I know that, behind all the professionalism, it must have killed him to do it.

CHAPTER

30

THEY PUT Meredith in Pediatrics.

I figured Larry did that to tie her to her childhood a little longer. Pediatrics, do you believe it? With all the nursery rhyme characters on the walls. It made it a whole lot easier for her, though, when kids from school stopped up to see her. I guess Larry had given that a lot of thought, too.

Larry operated on her, and they kept her in the recovery room for a few hours after. I didn't go in and see her that first day. I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

I heard about that from Larry, too. He called that night when I was doing my homework. I took the phone from Tony in the hall.

"Did you see your friend today?" Larry asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe she wasn't well enough to bother her."

"What in *hell* do you think you're there for?"

His anger shocked me. "What? Look, you didn't tell me to go and see her. You didn't tell me anything at all."

"Do you need a personal directive from the attending physician to stop in and visit with a patient?"

"I think you're being mean. And if you called me up to fight with me you can hang up right now!"

He calmed down. "Look, I didn't call you up to fight with you. Your friend needs you. More now than when you stole the pills for her."

"Why?"

"Just take my word for it, she does. Will you go in and see her tomorrow, please? If it isn't too much trouble? I wouldn't want to put you through any trouble."

"I don't *need* this from you!" Tears came to my eyes.

"I think you do."

"What's the matter with you? I'm going to hang up on you, I swear it. That's what I'm going to do."

"Go and see your friend tomorrow. Now you can hang up. Good night." He put the phone down.

"You two fighting again?" I turned to see Tony leaning against the kitchen door frame, watching me.

"He's crazy, you know that? What's wrong with him?"

Tony didn't seem surprised. "Don't be hard on him," he said quietly. "He's pretty upset over what happened to Meredith. He's blaming himself."

The thought had never occurred to me, but it made sense. My God, I thought, that's all I need. That's all we all need, Larry blaming himself.

I went to see Meredith the next day. She looked okay. She looked pretty good as a matter of fact, propped up against her pillows. She was wearing her own pajamas, and her sister had brought her hot curlers and make-up. And the minute I went into the room I knew it was going to be okay. In about two minutes, the tension broke and we were giggling over her favorite soap opera. Then we played a computer game for a while. But her mind wasn't on the game.

"Do you mind if we don't play, Nick? I'd like to talk."

"No. 'Course not."

She looked at me and smiled wanly. "I was all messed up inside, Nick. Your brother says I'm lucky to be alive. Only I may not ever be able to have babies, Nick. When I'm married and want them, I mean."

"Oh, Meredith, that's not so!"

"It is. Your brother told me." She looked at the blanket, running her fingers along its satin edge. "It's okay. Who wants babies, anyway. I told him I come from a big family. There's never enough to go around and everybody's always fighting. I'm going to be a career woman and marry an upward-motivated lawyer or investment broker. We'll have an apartment in New York and a home on Fire Island and jet to the Bahamas for Christmas."

"Meredith. . . ."

"I'll invite you to Fire Island. Maybe New York, too. I won't have to bother with those dumb pills anymore at least. I told him that, too. I gotta tell you something else, Nick."

"What, Meredith?"

"Your brother is totally wiped out on account of what happened to me. I'm afraid he's taking it personally. He's blaming himself."

"I know. My brother Tony told me."

"I don't want him to do that. He's so sweet, Nick." She looked at me earnestly. "I mean, his concern and everything. He's so gentle and so considerate, and when he takes care of you he makes you feel like you're the only patient he has in the world. He held my hand in the operating room before I went under because I was scared. I don't want him taking the blame for what happened. Would you tell him that for me sometime?"

I loved her more at that moment than if she were my real sister. "Sure." I said, "I'll tell him."

CHAPTER

31

"COME HELP me with the fire, Nick."

Thanksgiving dinner was just about finished. We eat late in the afternoon on Thanksgiving because it's the day of the homecoming game. All the kids are home from college, and everybody is so busy catching up on things with everybody else that nobody even watches the game until Runnymede scores. Which they do a lot of at homecoming games. Later we come home to Carol's turkey. I help a lot, setting the table with her best linen and silver. Everybody does.

When Larry and Molly came in, Tony was in the kitchen lifting the turkey out of the oven so Carol could check it, and he threw a towel at Larry. "Scrub up, Doc," he said. "Nobody comes into the kitchen unless they work."

Only Molly was exceptionally quiet. My family is never quiet at dinner. There's a lot of teasing and talk. And even though we'd argued the last time we spoke, Larry grabbed me when he came in and kissed me.

I noticed right away how quiet Molly was. And the whiteness of her face was an indication to me that something was wrong. Thing is, Molly's face is so pretty that when she's angry the pain

is etched on it like on marble sculpture. The pain heightens the prettiness somehow.

"Tell us about the hold-up at the hospital yesterday," Carol said midway through the dinner.

Larry just shrugged. "Dr. Ryan was held up in the parking lot on his way home. You know as much as I do. It was in this morning's paper."

"What they were after wasn't in the paper," Molly said. It was just about the only thing she said all through dinner, too.

Larry just looked at her. "Drugs," he said. "The drugs in his bag."

"Did he put up a fuss?" Carol asked.

"Not Ryan," Larry answered. "He wouldn't fight with his mother-in-law. He handed it over. They had a gun in his ribs."

"There's been a rash of hold-ups lately," Tony said. "Two homes were broken into at the west end of town this last week. Captain Szabo thinks it's a relatively young bunch after money for drugs, or drugs themselves."

A pall fell over the table then. I stole a look at Larry. It was the first time I'd seen him since Meredith had told me how hard he was taking what had happened to her. He did seem kind of nervous. Several times during dinner when he thought nobody was looking I saw a shadow cross his face. Larry's shadows, of course, could not be there without his suns. I know that because of his brilliance and successes his shadows exist where others do not have shadows at all.

"Nicki!"

I got up and followed Tony into the living room. He was sitting on the brick hearth crumbling up newspapers for the fire. He looked up. "I want you to do something for me."

I sensed the intrigue. Our family is loaded with it. And keeping track of the intrigue is Tony's specialty. He loves all the personalities and relationships involved. He considers the delicate balance of them his personal responsibility.

"What?"

He'd struck a match and was about to light the fire. "How long has it been since you spent a weekend at Larry's?"

I shrugged. "I dunno."

"A damn long time. Too long." The fire caught, and he closed the screen and got up. "Before he leaves today, I want you to ask him when it would be a good weekend for you to come."

"He hasn't invited me."

"Since when do you need an invite?"

"Things are different now, Tony."

"You're damned right they're different. That's part of the trouble. He's hurting, Nick. Things are strained between him and Molly."

"I know that."

He looked at me quickly. "Did he tell you?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

I shrugged. "Anybody would."

"No," he said. "It's unusual for a kid like you to pick something like that up. There's something between you two, a karma. I don't believe in stuff like that, but I don't know what else to call it. You're tuned in to each other's needs. It goes deep with a relationship like that. What you two have is rare and worth saving. It's like . . . a promise you have to keep to each other all your lives. We . . ." he hesitated. "We have promises to keep in this world, Nicki, that we sometimes find we never made."

He was looking at me significantly. Only Tony could say something like that to me and have me understand. Tony knew about promises. He'd kept all his to me, most of which he'd never made, never bargained for.

"I want you to try to restore what you had between you," he said. "This cold war has gone on long enough. I'm not going to let it go on any longer."

"I don't know if he wants me."

"Stop looking for excuses. He's got your room all ready. All

decorated, down to the last detail. He got Carol, one Saturday, to go with him and pick the stuff out. Swore her to secrecy because he didn't want to push you. Does that sound like he doesn't want you?"

I shook my head, no.

He opened the screen and poked at the fire. "Fine, that's all settled. Now there's something else. There were scouts from a few colleges at today's game looking at Eric. Been there for quite a few games this fall. One was from Penn State. I'd like him to go to Penn State, Nick."

I met his look. "So?"

"Don't be fresh," his voice was soft. "You know what I'm talking about. I'd like you to let him go."

"I'm not stopping him."

"Don't pull that stuff on me, Nick. I know better. He's thinking of staying in-state and going to Rutgers. The reason is you."

I stared hard into the fire, feeling its glow on my face.

"When he comes over today, I want you to settle it with him. Whether you tell him you won't go out with anybody else when he goes or agree with him that you will. That's up to you two, Nick. But settle it. You hear?"

"I hear." I barely got it out in a whisper.

He came over to me and put his hand on my cheek and sort of cupped my face in his hand. "I know how difficult it is," he said. "I was young once, too, remember? Sometime when you get to know her a little better, ask Eric's mother."

CHAPTER

32

"YOU LIE! You stinking liar! I never asked you not to go to Penn State!"

We weren't outside the house two minutes before I flung it at him.

"What's wrong with you, Nick?" Eric said.

"Don't look at me with your big brown eyes, so innocent! Telling my brother I'm to blame because you haven't made up your mind yet where you're going to college! Damn you, Eric!"

Overhead the sky was leaden, and the late November afternoon air was raw. The leaves were all down, most of them under our feet as we walked in the direction of the railroad station, down the hill.

"I swear, Nick, I didn't," he said, keeping pace with me. I had my jeans on now, and my heavy sweater and down vest and mittens. And I was walking real fast.

"Don't lie to me," and I struck out at him with my mittens, hitting him. He laughed and held my wrist tight. "Let me go!"

I struggled, but he wouldn't free my wrist. "Is that the way you were brought up to behave? To hit people? When are you going to grow up?"

"Eric Scherer, you let me go!"

He released me and I ran. I ran all the way down the hill to the railroad station, three blocks. The cold November air rushed through my lungs. There is an open green in front of the railroad station which is a small park with a Civil War cannon and benches. The station is one of those Victorian types, with all the gingerbread on the eaves. I ran across the green, past the Civil War cannon, Eric close behind. I couldn't outrun the best running back Runnymede High ever had. I knew that. But I could give him a good chase.

In a matter of minutes, he caught up and grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground. I hit the ground hard, and what breath I had left went out of me. My heart was pounding.

"You okay, Nick?" Our breath was coming out in vaporized spurts.

"Go away," I was crying.

"Hey, c'mon, huh? I'm sorry you got yelled at on account of me. He wants me to go to Penn State, Nick."

"So go. Who cares?"

"You can come and see me play. Coach said he'd come and he'll bring you with him. And I'll get home Thanksgiving and Christmas. And we can write and call. And Coach said. . . ."

"Stuff Tony."

"If your brother heard you talk like that you'd get it."

"So tell him."

"Hey, you shouldn't talk like that. You're too nice."

"I'll talk however I please. The least you could have done was not bring *me* into it with him."

"I didn't, Nick. I swear it. He just knows. He knows how it is with us. He just knows things like that without being told, 'cause he works with kids and all."

"Then he knows more than I do."

"Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I don't know how it is with us. How do I know?"

He moved closer to me on the ground. He started taking some old leaves out of my hair. "How do you want it to be,

Nick?'' His voice got huskier. ''You're not like other girls. You're different. You're special.''

''The only reason I'm special is 'cause you're scared of Tony.''

He moved back. ''You think that?''

''Well, isn't that why?''

''Jeez!'' He got up. He kicked the ground with his boot. He looked away from me. ''You really think that, huh? That the only reason I haven't messed with you is because of your brother?''

''You're scared of him,'' I said. ''Everybody is. Some guys in school wouldn't even ask me to go out because they're scared of him. You're about the only one who ever did.''

''So tell me how scared I am of him then.''

I brushed the leaves off my jeans, not answering.

''You're dumb, you know that? Look, Coach is the only guy in the world who's ever been like a father to me. You wanna know something else? Why I started dealing and got in trouble?''

I looked at him, afraid to say yes.

''The idea that he could be my old man blew my mind. I mean, jeez, I wanted him to be, in a way. But the idea that he could be, for all these years, and never say anything. . . . I didn't know what to think, what to believe, and when I saw a chance to make some extra money I figured the hell with it.''

He got quiet. He kicked at the leaves, dug his hands into his pockets. ''I think I probably even did it to get back at him. But that's got *nothing* to do with us. You and me. What I feel for you has nothing to do with him! And you're dumb because you don't even know that. You don't even recognize it when somebody thinks a lot of you. When they do, you're rotten to them.''

I wiped my nose with my mitten, stunned by everything he'd said. And touched. ''Tony says I walk all over everybody who loves me. He says I always did. Ever since I was a little kid.''

He looked away from me, across the green, up the hill, not answering.

"That's what Tony says," I persisted. My heart was pounding.

"He's right," he said. But he still wouldn't look at me. His profile was very handsome against the sky. I got up and went over to him.

"I'm sorry, Eric," I said.

He looked at me. And his brown eyes were swimming with hurt and tenderness. "I love you, Nick," he said gruffly.

In the next moment, he put his arms around me. I was shivering and he opened his jacket and held me inside it, close to him. I'd never been this close to him before, and there was a fragrance of cold air and after-shave about him. His arms went around me even tighter, and his body was hard and gentle at the same time against mine. And then he kissed me. His lips were soft and seeking and strong and gentle all at once. And I kissed him back. And all of a sudden I wanted to hold him so tight that I couldn't believe it. Tighter than I'd ever held anybody. I wanted to hold onto him forever and it pained me because I knew, yielding to him while he kissed me, that holding on had nothing to do with any of this, yet it was the only way I knew how. I wasn't cold anymore now. I stopped shivering. But I was out of breath in a different way.

He kissed me three or four times, pulling his face away to look at me, then kissing me again. His brown eyes were like the warm sun in a sunless November sky. And he seemed so much older all of a sudden. Different from the Eric I'd been hanging around with all summer. He was shaving regularly now. I noticed, for the first time, the faint shadow on his face. When had he started that?

"I haven't heard anything out of you," he said. He even sounded older, protective and authorative all at once. He was holding me around my waist now, waiting.

"I love you too, Eric," I said. I was surprised at the sound of

my voice, saying it. It came so naturally, like an expression of something I'd been feeling all along. The wind gusted around our feet, swirling the leaves now. He held me close again.

"What's gonna happen," he said, "when I go away to college?"

"I don't know."

He pushed the hair off my forehead. "You gonna date other guys?"

I shook my head, no. "Not if you don't want me to. But you'll be a big deal football player and all the girls. . . .

"Shut up about that. No freshman is a big deal football player. I'll be working my tail off to keep up marks and everything. And writing to you."

He kissed me again, soft and tender this time, not seeking, but confirming. Then, without a word, he took my hand and we started walking up the hill towards the house.

CHAPTER

33

THE BATHROOM was all steamed up. Larry was standing in front of the sink, wearing his sweat pants and nothing on top, shaving. I'd yelled to him a few minutes before that Jeremy was on the phone.

"He said he wants to see you today, Larry."

"Tell him no," he'd yelled through the door. "I've no time today. Tell him I'll get back to him later. And bring me a cup of coffee, will you, Gypsy?"

Jeremy sounded really sad on the phone when I gave him my brother's message. "Tell him I go home in two weeks. I just found out this morning," he said.

I fixed the coffee and brought it up to Larry. He opened the bathroom door and set the coffee down on the counter. "Thanks, honey."

"There's a cat outside the back door. Is it yours?"

"No." He was scrutinizing his face in the mirror. "It's a stray."

"I fed it."

"I was going to call the SPCA. It's been hanging around for a week."

"It's starved. Didn't you feed it?"

"Ruderman did. Why do you think it keeps hanging around?"

"Why don't you keep it?"

"I don't need a cat. I have enough responsibility." He sipped his coffee, looking at me. "What did Jeremy say?"

"You should get a dog. Carol said you should because your office is in the house, with all those drugs."

He sighed. "You going to tell me what Jeremy said?"

"He goes home in two weeks."

He turned away, picked up his can of shaving cream, shook it. "All right, you can stop glaring at me now. I'll get back to him."

"I'm not glaring at you."

"Did you call Molly last night?"

Last night had been good when I'd first come. We'd eaten in front of the fire in the sun porch. First thing I did, of course, when I got there after school was dump my overnighter in the living room and run upstairs to see my room.

I couldn't *believe* the job he'd done with it! The cherry four-poster was solid, not one of those teenage girl things. And it had a patchwork quilt instead of a bedspread. From somewhere, he'd gotten an antique washstand and pitcher and basin. And a cherry-framed oval floor mirror. The desk and bookcase didn't match, but they were all old and good. They'd been selected with care. And there were country curtains and a braided rug on the floor.

I turned right around and ran downstairs to the kitchen, where he was spooning homemade soup into bowls. I almost knocked the soup out of his hands, hugging him.

It was at supper that he told me he'd broken with Molly. He seemed sad but resigned. And he didn't want to talk about it, he said. I did. I asked him if I could call her. No, he said.

What did he mean, no?

No.

There were tears in my eyes. Molly and I were *friends!*

Absolutely not. He forbade it. I was to listen to him. His face was set and white.

Yes, I called. On the phone he'd put in my room. And we cried on the phone, me and Molly. Long distance. Long distance crying at night is the worst, the pits.

They'd been at each other ever since the business with Meredith, Molly told me. "I told him I was tired of his endless remorse. He won't let it be ended. One word led to another, and we ended up arguing our separate beliefs about abortion. I accused him of imposing his moral beliefs on a patient. I said a good doctor wouldn't do that."

Oh my God, I thought, that must have killed him.

"I was wrong," she went on. "He has a right to his convictions. But everything I stand for, all the liberalism, just surfaced. I said terrible things to him. How can you say such terrible things to the one you love, Nicki?"

She was asking me.

She'd suggested to him, she said, that maybe it would be better if they didn't see each other for a while. And he'd agreed. "And I love him so much, Nicki. It's like I'm dead since we broke up. Dead."

Larry was smoothing shaving cream on his face. "I asked you if you called Molly last night."

"Yes."

"I *told* you to stay out of it. Can't you ever listen?"

"You're stupid."

He started shaving. "Nobody asked you."

"I'm telling you. She said—"

"I don't want to hear what she said."

"Like I told you, you're stupid."

The scrape of his razor was all I got for a reply. My father used

to shave like that, and it had always fascinated me. Tony used an electric razor. You'd think a doctor would, it being faster and all.

"Why don't we go to Philadelphia and see her? We could go when you finish rounds at the hospital. We could bring Jeremy."

"Jeremy's not allowed out of state. Look, Nicki, I don't want to discuss this right now."

"Molly told me why you fought. I feel responsible. Right from the beginning, everything that's happened between us was because of Meredith. She was here the day Torrensano made his call. It was her I took the pills for. And now this."

"I don't look at it that way." He ran his razor under hot water. "We have to assume responsibility for our own actions. Tony and I have always taught you that." He finished shaving, rinsed his face and patted it dry. He applied after-shave.

"Larry, please!"

"No more, Nicki!" He threw the towel down. "I do not need an analysis of my love life by my little sister!"

"Go to hell!" I'd never said that to him before. But he didn't say anything. He brushed past me into the bedroom. He went to his chest of drawers and took out some socks and underwear and a folded-up dress shirt and threw it all on the bed. "Do you mind leaving the room so I can have some privacy?"

"You can have all the stupid privacy you want!" I flounced out, went back downstairs, poured myself coffee, and sat drinking it and planning. My mind was working fast now, in a dozen directions at once.

He came down in a few minutes, wearing grey flannel slacks. His shirt was tucked in, but not buttoned in front. I saw, with a surge of joy, that he was still wearing the gold chain Molly had given him. He buttoned his shirt. "I'm sorry we argued," he said.

"S'okay."

"I know you love Molly. I'm just not ready to talk about it yet, that's all." He reached into the cabinet for a box of cereal,

got a bowl and a banana and sat down. "Aren't you eating anything?"

"I'm not hungry."

He shook the corn flakes into the bowl, poured on milk, sliced the banana. "I wish you'd eat for me."

"Maybe I want you to send out to Marcellino's and get me Italian."

He just looked at me.

"Maybe I want some Laetrile."

He said nothing, just spooned the cereal into his mouth. "I can see we have a lot to talk about," he said. He poured some coffee. "I guess it's been tough for you, working at the hospital and having everybody tell you the miracles your brother pulls off. Don't believe them. The ones I don't pull off nobody talks about."

"I know about the ones you don't pull off."

He was just about to sip coffee and the cup stopped, midair. "Why don't you tell me about them?" he said.

I just looked down.

"Go ahead. I suppose you're referring to Meredith."

The color rushed to my face. "No, Larry. You think I blame you for Meredith?"

"You could."

"Oh, Larry, no! It wasn't your fault about Meredith!"

"I'll decide that if you don't mind. Right now I want you to go on with what you started."

I hesitated, then went on. "Tony says you're an achiever. Because of what Daddy did to you. He says you're looking for the approval Daddy never gave you. Through your work. Tony says that's okay. That lots of people are like you."

"I'm glad Tony approves. Continue."

"Maybe I'd better not."

"I insist. I'm fascinated."

"Okay. It's just that you expect everybody else to be perfect, too. And they aren't. Especially me. I do lots of wrong things. And I'll probably do a lot more, too."

He nodded. "Anything particular you have in mind that I should know about?"

"If you're going to joke. . . ."

"I'm sorry. Go on."

"Anyway, you expect to be able to make the world perfect. And when you can't you go into depression. And you make everybody miserable. And because . . . because everybody loves you, you think you can get away with it. You can't make everything right for everybody, Larry. With Meredith, it was the one thing you couldn't . . . it was just. . . ." I shook my head miserably.

"It was my vulnerable point, my weak spot, and I have to accept that. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I guess so. And so now everything's all messed up with Molly. And you're depressed over that, so now that Jeremy needs you. . . ." My voice trailed off.

"Jeremy too? You're hitting me with Jeremy?"

"Why didn't you talk to him before, when he needed you?"

"I said I'd get back to him."

"But he needed you *then!*"

"Jeremy's another one of the miracles I can't pull off." He got up and carried his dishes to the sink. "No matter what I do for him, he goes back to the same situation he came out of. Which isn't any good. You're right, Nick. I can't make things right for everybody. The toughest problem I have is accepting that. Maybe I ought to start with Jeremy."

He turned to look at me. "We'll talk when I come home later," he said. "This is part of what we have to do this weekend. Straighten some things out between us."

"I . . . may not be here later."

"What kind of nonsense are you giving me now? You came for the weekend, didn't you?"

"I don't know if I want to stay. I don't know if I'm ready for all this talk yet. You said you wouldn't push me."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Yes, I did. I'd like you to stay, Nick. But I won't hold you. I said that and I meant it."

He checked his watch. Then he reached for his jacket and put it on. He picked up his medical bag and his coat. Then he came and leaned over to kiss me. "Do me a favor and call Jeremy, and tell him I'll get to him later today?"

"Sure."

"Think about it before you go walking off, too, huh? Give us a chance." He rested his hand on top of my head. His touch was like a benediction and started the tears flowing inside me.

CHAPTER

34

THE STRAY cat was white with grey patches, and you could tell how it would fill out if somebody fed it. I gave it more milk after Larry left. Then I called Jeremy.

"He'll get back to you later, Jeremy. After rounds."

"I wanted to come over," he said. "But I have chores here this afternoon, and if I come over after chores I won't be back in time for curfew. And if I mess up curfew they won't let me go home in two weeks."

"Oh." We both fell silent. Were we both thinking the same thing?

"Do you want to go home, Jeremy?"

"What difference does it make?"

"If you break curfew how long do they keep you from going home?"

"I dunno. A month, six weeks, maybe. Dr. Larry wouldn't like that. He'd be sore with me."

"You wanna go to Philadelphia with me today, Jeremy?"

"You crazy? I can't go out of state. I'd do myself in here for good. They'd keep me another six or eight months!"

"I know."

Silence. And I could almost hear the wheels of his mind turning on the other end. "What you goin' to Philly for?"

"To see Molly. Larry's broken up with her."

"Oh, man! She's one foxy lady. Hey, don't tell Dr. Larry I said that, but she's one foxy lady. Nice. He know you're goin'?"

"No. If I go I'm in as much trouble with him as you are."

"You're crazy. Why you wanna make him so down on you? You got everything with him. Man, I wish he was my brother!"

"I have my reasons. Now you going with me or not?"

More silence. "I dunno. Let me think." Then, after a few seconds, "Okay, I'll go. How we goin'?"

"I think on the train. Larry has a timetable here. Can you get to the station in an hour?"

"Sure. Nicki? Just tell me one thing. Why you doin' this? With me, I mean?"

Now it was my turn to think for a minute. The subconscious mind works things out, I discovered, before the conscious mind does. "I figure you need more time with him, Jeremy. I know he needs it with you."

"Yeah." He liked that, I could tell. "Man, he's gonna whip our butts, Nicki. He's gonna be mad at us."

"I'll see you, Jeremy," I said. I gave the stray cat another saucer of milk before I left.

I had forgotten that Molly was a lawyer, that she would be a lawyer, first and foremost, when she confronted us. The way Larry is a doctor first and foremost, I mean. And Tony is a coach and teacher.

"My God," she said when she opened the door to see us standing in the hallway. And then, "Come in."

When I'd rung the bell in her downstairs corridor a few minutes earlier she'd screamed, though. "Nicki! What are you doing here! Are you alone?"

Had she thought I was with Larry? "I'm with Jeremy," I said.

Her apartment building must have been about a hundred

years old. It had high ceilings and windowseats, and it consisted of a living room, kitchenette, dining area, bathroom, and bedroom. I love apartment houses—the old-fashioned kind like hers, I mean. They have so much more character about them than the modern apartment complexes Larry used to live in. You can feel the people who once lived here; the drama, the color, the sorrows and joys leaping out of the walls. And it was decorated the way I'd have expected Molly to decorate. Chintz couch covers, lots of throw pillows, a well-placed piece of wicker, hanging plants, lots of books, lots of cheerful organized clutter. Posters on the walls, a stereo playing. I could imagine Larry here, lying with his feet up on the couch. His photo was on the end table. I caught a glimpse of the bedroom when we passed, and his picture was there, too.

Molly was dressed Saturday-afternoon-sloppy, and part of it was an old Georgetown sweatshirt of Larry's. That's where he went to college, pre-med anyway. She was cooking something tantalizing on the stove. She took our coats. "You kids must be frozen. You want some chili?"

She fed us first, asking no questions until she'd seated us at the kitchen counter and spooned chili into two bowls and given us crackers and ginger ale. When I was almost finished, she lighted a cigarette and looked at me. "Okay," she said, "out with it. What are you up to?"

"We came to see you, Molly."

"Does Larry know?"

"No."

"Tony?"

I shook my head.

She looked at me, long and fully. "Come into the bedroom with me," she said.

I followed her in. She closed the door. "Molly, I came to see you," I said again. But she wasn't buying.

"You're in trouble," she said urgently, "you know that? Is Jeremy allowed out of state?"

I hung my head now.

"Why!" and she stamped her foot. "Why did you come here? Larry's going to kill you, you know that? And now you've implicated me. Is that what you set out to do? Well, is it?"

"He needs more time with Jeremy," I said. "And Jeremy needs him."

"So you figured you'd get Jeremy penalized so he could stay at Winslow longer. He could lose Jeremy for allowing this to happen. You ever think of that?"

I was almost crying. "No."

"You knew I'd think of it, though, didn't you? And that I'd turn around and take you both right back. Is that what you were counting on? My taking you back and seeing Larry, is that it?" She was angry now. Her beautiful face was infected with anger.

"Yes," I admitted. "Either that or that he'd come here. I don't want you two to break up, Molly. I can't stand it."

"You should be spanked."

I did cry now. "Molly, don't be mad."

She went around to the other side of the bed and picked up the receiver and began to dial. "Is he back from the hospital yet?"

"He should be. What are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything. You are." She dialed, vehemence in each number. Then she held the receiver out to me. "Come on over here and tell him where you are and what you've done."

"Molly," I appealed.

"Get over here, damn you! I've had enough of this family!"

I went around the bed and took the receiver from her. Before I put it to my ear, I could hear Larry's voice.

"Hello?" he asked. And then again, more insistently, "Hello!"

CHAPTER

35

MOLLY HAD Larry's old car. I almost ran over to it and kissed it when I saw it in the parking lot behind her building. With its low and familiar lines, it was like an old friend to me.

She had figured that by taking us home instead of us waiting around for Larry to get there it would save time. Maybe she could get Jeremy back earlier and ease whatever punishment he was in for. That's what she told us as we locked up her apartment. "Not you, though," she said to me. "I hope your brother throws the book at you."

She looked good at the wheel of the Triumph, and she drove it expertly. Larry had had it tuned up for her, practically overhauled. "I bought it from him," she said crisply. "I really love it. It's great on gas."

I wondered whether the loving of it had anything to do with the fact that it was Larry's car, but I didn't ask. I was just glad to be in the car with her, all three of us together, cruising along on route I-95, going back to New Jersey. She was coming back with us. That's all I knew. Whatever she'd said, she was doing that at least. Anything could happen.

Every time I remembered Larry's voice on the phone I was in

agony, though. He hadn't been as angry as he'd been hurt and disbelieving. "I don't know if I can forgive you for this," he'd said. That was all. But that was enough. I'd hurt him. It went deeper than anger. It turned the corner into betrayal. He didn't deserve what I'd done to him either. He didn't have to tell me that. I knew.

I also knew that I'd either fixed things today between him and Molly, or ruined them irrevocably. I'd taken a lot on myself, overstepped myself maybe. I knew it now by the sound of Larry's voice on the phone. I tried not to think about that voice on the ride back. I tried not to think about how Larry must have felt when he got back to the house and I wasn't there.

We were back in Runnymede at four o'clock. Jeremy's curfew was four on Saturdays, but Molly had had him call Winslow from her apartment so it would go easier on him. They'd asked him where he was calling from. Jeremy had not lied. They can check the number, Molly had warned. Lying will go worse for you. So he'd told them.

Then she made him tell them that he was not with Larry. And that his parallel parent had nothing to do with this.

All the way home, my mind was working full-time, figuring. Don't think it wasn't. Winslow was still a good half hour on the other side of town. We were only a few blocks from Larry's. I asked Molly if she was going to drop us off there.

"I'm taking Jeremy to Winslow," she said.

"Maybe you'd better stop at the Seven-Eleven up ahead and let me call him. If he's really mad I won't go there tonight. I'll go home."

"You think Tony is going to be thrilled with you? Why don't you just go to Larry's and get it over with?"

But there was a method to my madness. I wanted to call and tell him we were down the block. Maybe he'd ask to speak to Molly. He was indebted to her now for what she'd done; surely he'd want to thank her.

The Seven-Eleven was just ahead. "Please, Molly," I said.

"Okay, okay." She pulled into the lot. "Make it fast. I don't want Jeremy to be any later than necessary."

I fished a dime out of my pocketbook and went into the outside phone booth and dialed Larry's number. I dialed his physician's number so he'd be sure to answer.

"Dr. DeBonis."

"Hello, Larry. It's me."

"Yes." The voice was calm, business-like.

"We're down the block at the Seven-Eleven, the three of us."

"I can't see you now."

"What?" A truck rushed by, and some kids came out of the store and got into this old Chevy and really revved it up. I plugged up one ear. "It's me, Nicki. We're down the block."

"I heard what you said. You can't come over now."

Oh, wow, he was sore. He was so mad he didn't even have any emotion in his voice. It was real detached-like. "Hey, I know you're mad. And you have a right to be. I caught all kinds of hell from Molly about it. So I know I did wrong and I'm sorry. And you can yell at me all you want. But you ought to at least say thank you to Molly. She's gone out of her way to get Jeremy back. She had him call the school and everything. She's been giving him advice like she's the attorney for the Chicago Seven."

"Tell Molly thank you. Tell her I appreciate it. Tell her to take Jeremy to Winslow. You go to Tony's."

Something fell inside me. "Hey, I'm *sorry*, okay? I said I was sorry. What does a guy have to do?"

"*I told you to go to Tony's!*"

"You don't have to yell. Okay." I sniffed. "I'll go. But it's getting dark out and I don't even know if Tony and Carol are home!"

He'd turned from the phone now. He was speaking to someone. He was covering the mouthpiece.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Some friends. I have some friends over."

"We had plans for tonight. You didn't tell me you were having friends over."

"They dropped in unexpectedly. Some old med school friends. Now, do I have to explain everything? Do you want to run my whole life?"

"No," I said in a small voice.

"Then go to Tony's."

I hesitated. Some small anger in me, some sense of injustice, wouldn't let go. "I don't think you're being very nice to Molly after she's done so much. She'd come over and see you now if you asked her to. I'm sure of it."

"I am not asking what you think." He was speaking slowly now, through clenched teeth. "I am not going to say it again, young lady. *Go home!*"

"You . . . really don't want me, do you?"

"You've got it, finally. No, I do not want you. Not here, not now, not tonight. After what you've done, it will be a while before I want to see you again. Okay?"

Okay. Everything riding on that word. So much. He waited.

"Okay," I said. I was unable to keep the tears from my voice. "Keep your stupid friends! And you can keep your old room you fixed for me, too! I don't want to be with you either! The only reason I came this weekend was because Tony made me."

"Fine."

"Fine with me too. I've had it with you, Larry DeBonis. Everybody has. I don't know why I even worry about you! I don't know why anybody does! You're miserable!" I was crying full force now. "And if and when you decide you do want to see me again, well tough! 'Cause I don't wanna see you!"

There was a shocked silence. "Good-bye," I bawled.

"Good-bye, Gypsy," he said.

I hung up. I stormed out of the booth, wiping my face. I went over to Molly's car.

"So you fought with him. Wonderful," she said. "Now what?"

"You'd better take Jeremy home."

"And you?"

"I'll call Tony. He'll come get me. He and Carol are having friends in tonight, but he'll come."

"Okay," she agreed, "if you're sure Tony's home. Otherwise I'd never leave you like this."

"They're home. Carol's been planning tonight for a week."

I watched her drive off; then I went inside the Seven-Eleven. Don't ask me why I didn't go right to the phone booth to call Tony. Something was bothering me that I needed to sort out first. Some unraveled edge needed immediate consideration.

Some fragment of thought was gnawing at my mind like a mouse trying to get in from the cold. I went into the store. It was empty, except for three kids playing the pinball machine in the corner. I didn't recognize them. I went to the refrigerators where the soda was kept. My mouth was so dry! I needed a soda desperately.

I slid the big doors open and reached for a can of Coke. I pried it loose from the plastic that tied it to the rest of the pack. In my mind I was going over our conversation, trying to figure out why it had made no sense at all. Because it hadn't. I knew that now.

But why? I stood there holding the freezing Coke in my hands, fighting my way through the web of my anger at Larry, pushing the anger aside because it was obscuring my vision. There was something I had to see, something I had to make sense of.

And then, standing there in the Seven-Eleven, holding the Coke, I knew.

"Can I help you, sis?" The man behind the counter was looking at me. I must have looked wonderful, standing there like that, with my face all tear-streaked, like I was retarded or something.

I turned to look at him. "That's it," I said.

"What's that, sis?"

"He wouldn't call me Gypsy if he was really mad at me."

The man looked at me like I was crazy.

My eyes flew open wide now. And what I heard standing there in the Seven-Eleven, with the pinball machine for background music, was Tony's voice, Tony's voice telling me, "there's a karma between you two. There always was. How do you know things are strained between him and Molly? I don't believe in that kind of stuff but I don't know what else to call it. A karma."

And I knew now. Don't ask me what I knew, but I knew.

Something was wrong.

The knowing was more than knowledge. It was feeling. It had nothing to do with sense or reason. It did not come from inside my head.

It came from inside *me*.

Goodbye, Gypsy. The tone of it stayed with me. There had been a sadness, not an anger there. *Gypsy*. He only called me that as an endearment!

I put the Coke down on the counter and ran out of the store. The man must have thought I was crazy. I ran out into the deepening dusk. I paused on the sidewalk out front, but only for an instant. And then I pointed myself blindly in the direction of Larry's house.

I ran all the way. And the closer I came, the more the feeling became a reality. Something was wrong.

CHAPTER

36

THE HOUSE was almost totally dark. On the side where his office was, one dim light shone through closed blinds. That wasn't right. When Larry gave parties, even impromptu ones, the house was ablaze with lights. And music. Why was the light on in his office side of the house? Did old med school friends need that environment to recall old times?

I'd never heard him speak of any med school friends. I slowed down on his front walk, my heart pounding, my breath coming out in vaporized spurts. The uneven sound of my breathing was the only sound in the world now. The street seemed deserted. Above me, stars twinkled in the early night sky.

There was a beat-up car in the drive. I squinted in the dark to see what it was. It was older than Eric's, that was for sure. A Chevy, maybe.

Old med school friends would have a better car than that by now. They'd be practicing doctors like he was. I went, soundlessly in my sneakers, up the front walk. I stood outside the entrance to his office.

"Meow."

That damned cat, the stray, the one with the grey spots that

looked like patches, recognized me and came rubbing against my jeans. I picked it up. It purred gratefully. It was a comforting sound. I held it close in my arms and came back off the small portico outside his office and went around the side of the house to stand under his office windows. I stood on the concrete abutment on the side of his sloping driveway that led to the garage.

I could hear voices now. Faintly. They were arguing.

"I told you," my brother's voice said, "I don't keep cash around. I didn't have office hours today anyway, so there's nothing in the safe."

"Just open it, Doc. We'll decide if there's anything worth having."

Silence. I was shaking.

"Okay," Larry said now, "I'll open it, but do you mind not poking the gun in my ribs? I know it's there."

It was like the world was exploding around me. I wavered and almost fell off the stone abutment, then caught myself. I hung onto a drainpipe coming down the side of the house. I stopped breathing, I think.

The phone rang inside then. It sounded very far away.

"I have to answer it," Larry said, "My patients. . . ."

"Okay, okay. But no more extended talks with the kid sister."

They were moving away from earshot now. "You've got the damned drugs," Larry was saying, his voice getting dimmer. "I don't know why. . . ."

I couldn't hear them anymore. They went into another room.

I almost crushed the patched-up cat in my arms. My head was spinning with jumbled words, forms, echoes, fears. Without realizing it, I found myself in front again. I hugged the cat closer, increasing my stride until I was out on the sidewalk. Then I started to run. The car. I looked back, but I couldn't get the license number from here. Help, that's what I needed.

They were going to kill my brother!

I ran the block again, my pocketbook bouncing against my

hip, the cat's claws in my ski jacket. I ran through the night towards the Seven-Eleven, and it was like I would never get there. It was like running the track in school at gym.

Oh God, I prayed, help me get there in time! Help me make it. Don't let them hurt him. Don't. . . .

I almost tripped on the sidewalk, but I recovered myself. Then in a few more strides, breathlessly, I fell into the phone booth outside the store. Cat and all. I closed the door, dropped the cat and reached into the change purse at the side of my pocketbook.

I couldn't find a dime!

I was crying. Where *was* it? I knew I had one. Why hadn't I stopped at one of the neighbors' houses? Then I found one. It was like a gold piece. I was shaking so much I could barely get it into the slot. I dialed operator.

The phone rang three times. It was an eternity. Each ring was like an electric shock through me. "Operator."

"I want the Runnymede Police. It's an emergency."

She rang the police. I leaned over the phone now like I was in pain, each ring pulling the breath out of me. But I had to keep my head clear! What was Larry's address?

"Runnymede Police." So matter-of-fact. So bored.

"There's a robbery taking place at Dr. DeBonis's office. Twelve-hundred Hillsdale Road."

"You want to give us your name, sis?"

"*Please!* I was there! My name is Nicki DeBonis. I'm his sister. I was outside and I heard through the window. They've got a gun on him!"

"We'll be there in a couple of minutes, sis. Hold on. Don't do anything foolish."

I collapsed on the seat in the phone booth, crying. The cat was meowing around my feet.

CHAPTER

37

I WALKED, slowly now, back down the street toward Larry's house. The white cat with the grey patches was in my arms. I walked zombie-like now, afraid of what I would see when I got there.

The cat was purring in my ear.

" 'S okay, puss," I said. "It's going to be okay. They'll get here. They'll take care of everything."

We exist, in crisis situations, on some kind of other level. All my senses, my nerves, were taut, strung out, tuned in. Yet I was on hold. Afraid to cry, afraid to run, afraid to look, almost afraid to breathe. As if crying or running or looking or breathing would disturb whatever delicate balance existed at that moment in the universe and place Larry in more danger.

I just walked toward the house. And if walking can be a prayer and holding in your sobs can be a prayer, then what I was doing was praying. And hearing, again, Tony's voice.

"We have promises to keep in this world, Nick, that we sometimes find we never made."

I'd kept mine, hadn't I? I'd come back when he told me he didn't want to see me because of what I'd done. All the stored-up angers and hurts I had for him didn't matter. In the end, all

that came through was the love. It had gotten through to me in the moment when I was most angry with him. Alone and rejected in the Seven-Eleven, it was the love for him that had fought its way through in my consciousness, like a distant light in the fog of my own unreason.

I hugged the cat even closer, boosting it in my arms.

It was my love, my closeness to Larry, that had allowed me to push the blind anger aside long enough to perceive that something was wrong.

Oh God, I prayed, doesn't that count for anything? If you love somebody that much, in spite of everything else that gets in the way, isn't that enough?

Enough to keep him safe?

Safe. All Larry ever worried about was safety and security. He'd been obsessed with it. Telling me to live defensively, worrying himself sick over Molly in Philadelphia. Molly should be here, he'd told her. With him. Married to him. So she could be safe.

In his house. Where men with guns were right now holding him up.

"It's no good," I sobbed to the cat. "It's no good anywhere. Nowhere is safe."

That's what I learned walking that block to my brother's house. Already, as the knowledge of that seeped into me, I saw the police cars converging. From all directions. Lights flashing red, giving stage effects to this awful new knowledge of mine that was playing itself out inside my head.

I was like a sponge, absorbing insights as I paused on the sidewalk outside Larry's house. Because right on top of that revelation came another.

You have to be nice to people you love because you don't know, when you walk out of the house in the morning, if you'll ever see them again!

Why hadn't I been nicer to Larry at breakfast? Why don't they tell you this kind of stuff? Why do they let you find out these things for yourself?

But Tony had told me. Once in my bedroom, after I'd come home from Larry's that awful Sunday morning when I found out he was making me work at the hospital. And again on Thanksgiving Day. Tony had told me the best he could. I just hadn't listened.

"Look out, sis, you'd better get out of firing range," and a Runnymede policeman in helmet and bullet-proof vest came up to me. "You the sister? The one who called?"

"Ye . . . ess. Is my brother going to be okay?"

"We'll get him out safe, sis, don't worry. Why don't you walk over to that police car and wait with the captain now, huh?"

Mechanically, I obeyed. The police captain was on the bullhorn now, telling the men inside Larry's house to come out. More police cars were pulling up. Suddenly there were cops in helmets and bullet-proof vests all over the place. People were coming out of their houses, crowding around, too. Everybody was asking everybody else what was going on. A bunch of teenagers appeared from nowhere, then a man with a camera slung over his shoulder, in jeans and a fatigue jacket and hiking boots. With him was a young woman with a notebook. They went up to the captain.

"How many men have you got in there, Captain? They holding him hostage?"

"Not now. Give it all to you later," the captain said. "And stay behind the barricade, please. We don't want anybody hit with stray shots."

Stray shots. I reeled and caught myself. They had police barricades set up now and one policeman was ushering the curious onlookers behind them. The photographer from the paper was snapping pictures. The reporter was taking notes. A couple of State Police cars had pulled up. Seeing them tore into me. The last time the State Police had pulled up like that in front of Larry's house was that day in September when Torrensano made his phone call. An innocent joke. A kid's prank. A hundred years ago.

The State Police were conferring with the Runnymede police captain, and I heard words like "drug ring," and "who pulled the other holdups."

The captain's voice was on the bullhorn again, and his men were kneeling and standing in various places around Larry's house. The radios crackled in the police cars, phantom voices that seemed to go with the flashing red lights. The Runnymede rescue van pulled up and the men in white coveralls got out.

Oh my God, I thought. It's the six o'clock news at my brother Larry's house.

Then another car careened around the corner and pulled up at the curb. Tony's car. "Oh," I cried out. A policeman put a restraining arm on me. "Stay here, sis, don't move."

Tony got out. I saw some people in the car with him—Carol and their friends, I guessed. He said something to them and slammed the door and came walking along the street behind the barricades until he got to the Captain's car. Then he pushed through the people, excusing himself. I saw his blond head above the others as he pushed through the crowd. I broke free of the policeman and went around the car as he vaulted the barricade. I ran to him. He held me close in his arms.

"You okay?"

"Yes, but Larry . . ." I sobbed.

"They'll get him out."

He asked no questions of me. Not even about the cat I was holding. Not why I wasn't with Larry, nothing. He simply accepted the situation and held me.

"Hello, Tony."

"How does it look, Captain."

"Like to talk to you about the layout of the place a little bit."

"Sure." And to me. "Stay here; don't move." Then he went to consult with them. They went off in a distance, the police captain and some of his men and Tony.

I guess they decided to move in, to go for the front door. I guess maybe they needed somebody like Tony, somebody close

to Larry and responsible to say go ahead. I guess they gave him the odds and Tony said okay, try it.

A murmur went through the crowd as the police closed their net around Larry's house, moving up onto the lawn, taking their places around the doors and windows. Tony came back to me and put his arms around me again.

"They'll kill him," I sobbed.

"The police know what they're doing. They're taking no unnecessary chances. You've gotta flush them out."

Again now, the captain was on the bullhorn, telling the men inside that they might as well come out and give themselves up. Nobody would be hurt. The sense of excitement traveled through the crowd like electricity.

My eyes were glued to the front door of Larry's office, spotlighted as it was.

And then it opened.

There was a scuffle. The crowd drew in its breath. "Hold it, everybody," I heard the captain say.

Larry came out first. My brother Larry, in his corduroy slacks and Oxford shirt and preppy loafers. The shirt open at the collar—*the gold chain from Molly gleaming under the strobe lights.*

They had his hands behind him, and one of them had a gun in his ribs. Two more of them cowered behind the one with the gun.

A *gun*! It caught the light. It was the most ugly thing I'd ever seen! And it was at Larry's ribs! How dare they! My brother! Who *were* they that they dared walk into our lives with their filthy needs and put a gun to my brother! Who were they that they should touch our beautiful lives with their grubby existence and threaten the life of a decent, beautiful person who had helped so many others! A *doctor*! All those years of learning, of training, inside his head!

"No," I sobbed and started to pull away, but Tony held me firm. "Hush," he whispered in my ear, "Don't you see the men on the roof?"

I hadn't. The strobe lights didn't reach up that far. There was a slanted roof just over the two entrances to Larry's house. I'd looked out on it a hundred times from the window in the upstairs hall. On it now were two policemen, poised, waiting.

Everything happened real fast then. One policeman on the roof called out to the man with the gun in Larry's ribs. Instinctively, the man turned, raised the gun and fired, stepping back from Larry to do so.

Larry's hands were tied behind him, but he made a dash and rolled over on the ground.

There was an exchange of gunfire. The crowd roared. Nobody knew what happened in the confusion. The policeman on the roof clutched his arm and his partner on the roof went to his aid to keep him from falling off. The man on the ground who'd had the gun at Larry fell, and the police moved in then from all sides. Before they did, though, the two men hovering in Larry's doorway dropped their guns and came out with their hands in the air.

And it was like the air going out of a balloon then. The police took control, and the men who, minutes before, had terrorized us all bent over as the police handcuffed them from behind, their heads low so the photographers couldn't capture their faces as they snapped them being hustled into the police van.

The one on the ground must have been hit in the leg. Rescue squad men were running over with stretchers, taking the wounded police officer and the thief to the hospital.

"Just a minute." And wouldn't you know, there was Larry, rubbing his wrists where they'd been tied and hovering over the stretchers to see the extent of the wounds. *Even over the stretcher of the man who'd had the gun in his ribs!* Conferring with the Runnymede rescue guys, walking with them alongside the stretcher with the policeman on it, thanking him.

"Let me go!" I said to Tony. He released me. And with the cat still in my arms I ran across Larry's front lawn. He was surrounded now by police. Two reporters and two photographers

from both the daily and weekly papers in Runnymede closed in on him. I couldn't get near him.

"Larry," I sobbed.

"You're not taking that stuff," he was saying to the captain. There were bags on the ground that the men had dropped. Canvas bags. Must be his drugs.

"Evidence, Doc." The Captain grinned and nodded to his men who, with the State Police, were confiscating the bags.

"Is this the first time your office has been broken into?" a reporter asked.

"Did you know they were part of a drug ring?" from another reporter.

Larry was still rubbing his wrists, talking with the police and answering reporters' questions at the same time. The crowd was dispersing slowly now, the police and rescue vans leaving. Only a few teenagers were hanging around a distance away. It was like the lights had gone off and the show was over. In the distance, I saw Tony and Carol coming slowly across the lawn.

One of the State Police went by me, carrying some bags of drugs. "You gonna be a witness this time, sis?"

I looked at him and recognized him as one of the ones who'd come to Larry's house the day Torrensano made his call.

Yes, I thought to myself, watching Larry, I'll be a witness. I'll tell them how love is stronger than anything. I'll tell anybody who wants to know how there is something between two people sometimes that nobody can explain. I'll tell them how the real war is not in any world trouble spot, but right down the block.

I'll tell them how nowhere is safe. I'll tell them that love can't keep somebody you love safe, no. But if you love that somebody in spite of everything that gets in the way, it's enough.

I'll tell them that sometimes we have promises to keep that we never even made in this world.

"You never answered my question, Doctor," one reporter said. "Who called the police?"

Larry looked up past the reporters and photographers and looked directly at me. "My sister called the police," he said simply. Then he held out his arm. "Gentlemen and women of the press, this is my sister."

They all turned to look at me. But I didn't care. I just went to him, into his arms, me and that old patched-up cat who must have been half crushed to death by now. Larry held us both tight.

"Was your sister in the house with you?"

"How did she get out?"

"How did she manage to call?"

I was crying now. "How did you know?" Larry whispered to me.

"I just knew." I said it so soft nobody could hear.

"I told you to stay away. But you came back, even after the way I spoke to you. I tried to hurt you so you wouldn't come back."

"You called me Gypsy," I told him. "You never call me that when you're mad at me. But it was more than that. I *knew*. Tony says there's a karma between us."

"Tony . . . ," and he looked up. "Didn't I see him hanging around somewhere? Yes. There they are. Hey, you two, c'mon over."

But the photographers were snapping pictures now of me in Larry's arms. "Hold on, Doc," one of them said, "don't move. We want more pictures of you with the kid. Hug her close again, would you? Yeah, beautiful!" And the flashbulbs were going off in my eyes.

"This is my brother, guys, would you let him come over?" And then, still holding me, he reached over to grab Tony's hand and kiss Carol. The photographers were getting ready to snap that too, but Tony held them off.

"No, no," he said. "C'mon, you guys, give me a break."

They knew him, of course. "What's wrong, you shy all of a sudden, Coach?"

"Yeah, I'm shy," Tony said. "C'mon, guys, I mean it.

You're at me all the time, give me a break. Take some more with my sister and brother. That's the picture you want. That's where the story is. Take care, Larry," and he and Carol walked off, waving good night. "We'll see you in the morning." Their friends were waiting for them at the edge of the lawn.

So they took some more pictures of us standing there, me with the cat in my arms and Larry holding us both. "Hold on, it'll be over in a moment," Larry whispered to me.

And while they snapped he talked. "Where'd you get the cat?"

"It's your stray. He stayed with me the whole time. He needs a home. Can we keep him?"

"Yes."

"Tony and Carol are leaving."

"It's been a lot for her, I guess. They have to get back to their guests anyway. They know you'll be okay with me. In a few minutes, I'll throw a coat on and take you home if you want."

"I am home."

He squeezed me tighter.

"Aren't I?"

"Yes. This is your home. Whenever you want."

"Do you think we can call Molly later and tell her everything?"

He hesitated only a second. "Yes. And tomorrow we'll go together and get a dog. Shall we break this up now? I'm freezing to death. Shall I invite them in for coffee?"

"Oh yes. Let's."

"Okay, okay, guys," he said, "that's enough. What about we go inside and have some coffee and I'll give you the whole story?"

"Great, Doc. Coffee sounds good, lead the way."

So we went into his house and put on the lights and made coffee. We sat around the living room drinking it. We toasted English muffins and had them with butter and jelly. And Larry gave them the story.

And then, when he was finished telling about the hold-up,

they asked other questions. They asked about me and my brothers and our relationship. Human interest, they called it.

Larry hesitated a moment. I was sitting next to him on the couch. He didn't look at me. He poured himself another cup of coffee and started speaking, very slowly and quietly.

"I was sixteen when my sister was born. That's when my mother died. Nicki's always meant a lot to me and to my brother. I love her very much. I don't even know if those words cover how I feel about her. For the most part, my brother raised her, but a few years ago when my father died Tony asked me if I'd like to assume some of the responsibility for Nicki that had been entrusted to him. There's a paper in a lawyer's office here in town that says I'm one of Nicki's guardians. And I'll tell you this. I talk to kids in school all the time about family life. As a physician, I talk to a lot of parents. But I never knew until this last year or so that parenting is the toughest job in the world."

The silence was like the fluttering of birds' wings. You could hear it. I looked around the room, wondering if the others could hear it too.

"But I'll tell you this, too. As a doctor I've had all the responsibility anybody needs. But a person doesn't go inside himself to find out what he's really like. A person doesn't ask the right questions of himself until he becomes a parent."

The pitch of the silence was so incredible it was like a high note that would break a wine glass. They were listening to him so intently.

Larry put his arm around my shoulder. "We have our problems, of course. Just like other families. We settle them. There are," and the arm tightened around me, "a few things we still have to settle yet, aren't there, Nicki?"

I knew that if I looked at him I would cry. So I decided to look at him later. I knew what his expression would be. It would be like it hadn't been with me in a long time.

He excused himself then and got up to make a phone call. "Gotta call my girl in Philadelphia," he told them. And he went to the wall phone in the kitchen and dialed.

I kept talking to the others, but I watched him. He was leaning over the counter in the kitchen, talking to her, leaning over, talking cautiously at first, then excited and happy.

The next day, the picture was on the front page of both the daily and weekly papers in Runnymede. There I was, Larry's arm around me. He was looking down at me, the sister who'd had the smarts to call the police. The papers played up the kid sister angle real big. They loved it.

I had my face half-hidden in his shirt. My eyes, peering out at the world, were larger than they had a right to be. And you could see that there in the protection of Larry's arms I was not quite sure of things. And yet I was more certain about things than I'd been in a long time. You could see that too.

And that, like Tony told the photographers and reporters, is where the *real* story is, after all.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 00467 026 9

WITHDRAWN
No longer the property of the
Boston Public Library.
Sale of this material benefits the Library.

Boston Public Library
COPLEY SQUARE
GENERAL LIBRARY

YA
PZ7
.R459PR
1981

88156040

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

Photo: Bob Harris (*Trentonian* photo)

THE AUTHOR

Ann Rinaldi has been a writer from the time she was a young child. Writing is as important to her as breathing. For the past twelve years she has been writing professionally as a columnist for the Pulitzer-Prize-winning newspaper, *The Trentonian,* and has herself been awarded first prize in the New Jersey Press awards. Her second book, *Promises Are for Keeping,* is a sequel to the successful young adult novel, *Term Paper.* Mrs. Rinaldi and her husband make their home in New Jersey. They have two teen-age children, one in college and one in high school.

Jacket design and illustration by Anita Benarde

Walker and Company
720 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10019

Printed in the United States of America

Term Paper

By Ann Rinaldi

What the Reviewers said . . .

"Rinaldi's first novel declares strongly for family obligations of love and forgiveness. . . . this first-person narrative will appeal to junior high readers."

School Library Journal

". . . a tender story of the loving care and sacrifice that Tony, his wife, and another brother have made for the little sister they've raised. . . . The characterization and dialogue are strong, the writing style and plot development consistently structured and paced. Recommended."

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, University of Chicago

"Rinaldi's first novel is impressive."

Publishers Weekly

"Not somber, but serious and perceptive."

Chicago Tribune

ISBN: 0-8027-6442-8